WEBSTER AND THE THEATRE OF CRUELTY: A THEATRICAL CONTEXT FOR THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, a representative example of the Jacobean "horror" play, in terms of its possible relationship to Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, a dramatic theory chiefly propounded in *The Theater and its Double*. The introductory section outlines the basic aims and principles of a Theatre of Cruelty as postulated by Artaud, and attempts to show why, in view of recent theatrical experiments, Webster's play might profitably be investigated within this twentieth century context.

The first two chapters proceed to a discussion of Webster's complex theatrical form, attempting to show how and why he makes full use of any available dramatic and theatrical device and convention to aid in the presentation of his personal vision of man and society. The play is thus first examined in the context of Total Theatre, a principle basic to a Theatre of Cruelty.

The central chapters of the thesis investigate the thematic lines in *The Duchess of Malfi*, and attempt to show how in spite of the many components from which the play is constructed, there nevertheless emerges a unified and coherent dramatic vision. This vision is seen as being developed in three ways, separable for purposes of discussion but
ultimately closely inter-related, namely visual imagery, verbal imagery and characters-in-action. Thematic presentation through visual and verbal imagery is discussed in Chapter III, while Chapter IV deals in more detail with aspects of characterization.

The argument advanced in Chapter IV is that Webster's method of characterization is based on what is basically a simple Good and Evil contrast, with the characters developed as opposed Forces or symbols. The characters in action, seen as opposed Forces, constitute a third presentation of the central themes, working with and strengthening the presentation of the themes as explored in the visual and verbal imagery.

The final chapter of the thesis examines the play in somewhat more general terms. An attempt is made to relate The Duchess of Malfi to more traditional genres—tragedy, comedy and satire. Webster's particular use of certain features of these traditional forms is discussed. Because the play is imperfect if measured against the accepted conventions of tragedy, the theory is advanced that it might be viewed as related philosophically to the contemporary Theatre of the Absurd, on which the Theatre of Cruelty has had considerable formative influence.

Throughout the discussion of themes and characterization, references to Artaud and interpretations of Artaud's ideas are included wherever possible to point out the closeness of the relationship between The Duchess of Malfi and
Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The thesis advanced throughout is that the play contains within itself elements which were not formally advanced as an approach to drama until this century. In effect, a Jacobean Theatre of Cruelty is being suggested as existing in fact if not in name.

Concluding remarks suggest that if the felt relationship between The Duchess of Malfi and the Theatre of Cruelty is seen to be a valid one, an investigation of other works by Jacobean dramatists might prove of use in giving meaning and significance to much of the violence, horror and grotesquery which appears in the plays of the period. The response of the Jacobean dramatists to their times can be seen as in many ways analogous to the response to the human condition in the dramas of the contemporary avant-garde.
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INTRODUCTION

The following study is based on the initial assumption that a theory of drama and theatre which was written in and for the twentieth century can be of use in interpreting and understanding an early seventeenth century play. The theories of Antonin Artaud (1895-1948), as presented in the collection of essays published in English under the title The Theater and its Double called for a form of theatre which would break completely with the portrayal of outer life—the superficial representation of man in a realistic, comprehensible environment—and, through the complete abandonment of realistic stage techniques, concentrate on delineating on the stage the inner life of man—man's repressed and subconscious fears, obsessions and proclivities. On the stage, the true nature of man would be revealed—irrational, violent, anarchic—man freed of social restraints and obligations. Drama was to be an expression of the inner condition of man, and to this end all the physical and technical resources of the theatre were to be brought into play to work towards the annihilation of the spectator's acquired inhibitions by a direct appeal to the nerves and senses rather than to the intellect. To this end, rational communication was to be abandoned; speech and dialogue were relegated to a subordinate position, since their origin and function was largely discursive rather than intuitive.
The reasoning process, at least while the spectator was in the theatre, was to be abandoned.

Theatre such as Artaud wanted it to be thus becomes an outlet for our repressions; our eyes, rather than looking analytically at a realistic representation of man in a social context, are turned inwards and we look upon our inner selves as portrayed on the stage. Artaud called his theatre a Theatre of Cruelty, a term inclusive not only of subject matter and visual stage representation, but also—and more importantly in fact—of a desired effect on the spectators. In this latter sense, he compared the theatrical experience to the presence of a plague in a community:

... the theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative. ... it is not only because it affects important collectivities and upsets them in an identical way. In the theater as in the plague there is something victorious and vengeful: we are aware that the spontaneous conflagration which the plague lights wherever it passes is nothing else than an immense liquidation. A social disaster so far-reaching, an organic disorder so mysterious—this overflow of vices, this total exorcism which presses and impels the soul to its utmost—all indicate the presence of a state which is nevertheless characterized by extreme strength...

... there can be theater only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols.

It is impossible to offer a satisfactory capsule definition of the Theatre of Cruelty and its far-reaching implications. Artaud's essays, reviews and notes are only partially represented by the collection titled The Theater and its
Double. He repeats and frequently contradicts himself, approaches the same problem or the same concept in a number of different ways. The brief description above should serve as an initial indication of the context within which The Duchess of Malfi is to be examined; various facets of the Theatre of Cruelty will be elaborated upon during the course of the discussion to follow.

Artaud seemed to have an admiration for Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. There is an unstated implication that he sensed in many of the plays of those somewhat chaotic eras something of the quality of dramatic expression which he felt the modern drama, with its over-dependence on realism, credibility of character and plot and presentation of palatable moral issues, had lost. For example, Artaud admired Ford's 'Tis Pity She's A Whore. Giovanni, he observes:

... does not waver an instant, does not hesitate a minute, and thereby shows of how little account are all the barriers that could be opposed to him. He is heroically criminal and audaciously, ostentatiously heroic. Everything drives him in this direction and inflames his enthusiasm; he recognizes neither earth nor heaven, only the force of his convulsive passion, to which the rebellious and equally heroic passion of Annabella does not fail to respond.

"I weep," she says, "not with remorse but for fear I shall not be able to satisfy my passion." They are both forgers, hypocrites, and liars for the sake of their superhuman passion which laws obstruct and condemn but which they will put beyond the law.

In his proposed program for a Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud suggested staging an adaptation of a work from the time of
Shakespeare, "... a work entirely consistent with our present troubled state of mind..." such as Arden of Feversham, or something else from the same period—"Works from the Elizabethan theater stripped of their text and retaining only the accouterments of period, situations, characters, and action." In using Artaud's theories as a basis for a study of The Duchess of Malfi I am thus assuming, and attempting to show, that the play contains elements of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty which have always been there, which were in fact put there by Webster himself. What has intrigued me has been the fact that except for one important factor—the dialogue—neither Webster's play nor Artaud's theories need be distorted or qualified to any great extent for the felt relationship of one to the other to be established as a valid one.

Two further points should be noted at the outset, one in relation to Artaud, the other to Webster. It is important to remember that Artaud's original manifesto for a Theatre of Cruelty was and is largely theoretical; in—and indeed partially because of—its extreme form it never became an actual realized fact. Even Artaud was doubtful about effecting a full realization of his personal vision of what the theatre could and should be. However, his writings have had an important influence in two rather large areas; first, on the entire avant-garde movement in contemporary drama and, more relevant to the following discussion, as an influence on the re-interpretation and staging of more traditional works—plays in
which dialogue and language remain an important factor. The use which can be made of the basic philosophy of cruelty in the theatre, combined with staging techniques which use the verbal, poetic imagery inherent in a given work as an additional element of cruelty to support and underline the visual and specifically theatrical delineation of cruelty has been recently revealed in Peter Brook's productions for the Royal Shakespeare Company of *King Lear* (1962), *Titus Andronicus* (1956-57) and Peter Weiss' *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade* (1964-65). In these productions, the plays as written have obviously been felt to contain, intrinsically, elements which the theories of Artaud have formulated in non-dramatic and theoretical terms. Hence the plays as produced have made use of Artaud's writings, admittedly diluted, as an interpretive and production guide. I see no reason why the same interpretive principles cannot be applied to Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, or for that matter, to many other works from Webster's period. As Robert Ornstein observes:

> For a few brief hours in the theatre, the demons that haunted the Jacobean artistic mind assumed a flesh and blood as well as poetic reality.\(^\text{10}\)

Secondly, in relation to Webster, with the notable exception of John Russell Brown's introduction to the Revels Plays edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, critical writing on
Webster seems to have concentrated on the work as dramatic literature, and insufficient attention seems to have been given to the play as a piece of theatre, written for performance and fully effective only in performance. As dramatic literature, which presumably presupposes the leisure to reflect and contemplate, *The Duchess of Malfi* can rapidly fall to pieces, particularly if one applies standards of realism to the play—the motivations and consistency of characters, the cause and effect development of plot, the credibility of the work as a whole. I feel that Webster wrote for immediate impact and effectiveness, and that any attempted evaluation of the play must keep this in mind. The flaws of construction are undeniably present, but become minimal in the immediacy of a stage performance. Further, when standards or concerns of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty are applied to the play, what one sees through literary analysis as dramatic flaws become, perhaps perversely, theatrical virtues. In this regard, the fact, as noted in Don D. Moore's recent article "Webster in the Modern Theatre,"¹² that productions of *The Duchess of Malfi*, by approaching the play largely as a piece of realistic drama, have had only limited success on the modern stage only reinforces my theory that in the writings of Antonin Artaud lie both interpretive and staging approaches to the play which have remained largely unexplored.
CHAPTER I
WEBSTER'S THEATRICAL FORM

The concept of a Theatre of Cruelty is tailor-made for Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, which has been often unjustly criticized for its lack of stylistic homogeneity. In this initial chapter, I would like to suggest a more tolerant attitude be taken to Webster's methods of composition. There is, to be sure, little case to be made for a stylistic unity of the dramatic or theatrical content of The Duchess of Malfi. Fortunately, however, not all critics of Webster are as bothered by his structural chaos as is someone like William Archer. In his condemnatory criticism, he insists that there is simply too much unassimilated material in The Duchess of Malfi. Webster mistakes quantity for quality, Archer feels, although he admits that "This attempt to apply rational canons of dramatic construction to an Elizabethan 'masterpiece' will doubtless be regarded in many quarters as little less than sacrilegious." Sacrilegious only in that the derogatory attitude to the Elizabethan dramatists as reflected in The Old Drama and the New takes little account of the fact that Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences were not interested in Ibsen or Shaw-like consistency, but in variety—as much of it as possible—within a given play, or, further, that while there is no compositional unity in a play such as The Duchess of Malfi, there is nevertheless a definite compositional
pattern or structure present, albeit devoid of the rational and logical progression of events which Archer demands in dramatic structure.

As Muriel Bradbrook suggests, the only true unity of an Elizabethan play was its poetic unity, a unifying vision expressed in imagery and language, a verbal motif which underlies and underlines all the disparate visual and theatrical elements utilized in the actual composition and stage realization of a work such as The Duchess of Malfi. Time and space could be neglected, telescoped or expanded. A causal sequence of events, so important in any realistic drama, was not required, not expected and certainly not followed to any degree of regularity. A strictly logical framework was impossible, Bradbrook suggests, since the dramatists were expected—by their audiences—to incorporate so much. She compares the resulting form of Elizabethan drama to the heterogeneity of a modern revue, which often does have, of course, one unifying theme revealed and repeated by a variety of theatrical means. The effect of a work would thus be both immediate and cumulative. The Duchess of Malfi works upon us in much the same way; individual scenes have an immediate and powerful effect, but working within us at the same time is a cumulating effect which is felt only after the final scene has ended.

Webster builds his play through drawing freely upon whatever best suits his needs at the moment. Much critical work has been done on Webster's commonplace book method of
composition, his free borrowing and adapting of passages from other writers to suit his own poetic needs. But he is also a great borrower and adapter of theatrical devices and conventions. This habit has been cited by T.S. Eliot as "artistic greediness," resulting, admittedly, in an impure art form. But why need this be regarded as a fault? In the theatre, carefully controlled and handled as it is in The Duchess of Malfi, there is no real need to condemn "... their [i.e., the Elizabethan dramatists] desire for every sort of effect together, their unwillingness to accept any limitation and abide by it." If we do condemn Webster for his excessive mixture of devices and conventions, he becomes, as Eliot calls him, "... a very great literary and dramatic genius directed toward chaos," a remark which, I think, combines praise for his particular dramatic vision with condemnation for the chaos of his dramatic form.

As F.L. Lucas notes in the introduction to his edition of Webster, we must regard the plays less as consistent wholes than as a series of great situations, and in the composition and ultimate theatrical realization of these great situations, we must see Webster, unapologetically, as an inveterate borrower and plagiarizer. There was, as Muriel Bradbrook notes, a common pool of stock material--themes, character types, visual devices, theatrical effects and tricks--to which Elizabethan dramatists all contributed and from which they all drew. Out of this evolved a vast number of unsanctified (in the sense
that they were not written down and formulated as rules) but accepted conventions; a body of theatrical material which was the common property of the dramatists and recognized and accepted as such by the audiences. Accepting the truth of Miss Bradbrook's approach, does not the interest then centre on the particular use to which an individual dramatist, such as Webster, put the various conventions in conveying his own personal vision of life?

There is an undeniable unity in The Duchess of Malfi -- a thematic unity to which Webster adheres and to which all the diverse theatrical and dramatic elements of the play contribute. Martin Esslin in The Theatre of the Absurd offers a suggestion for evaluating the form of works by writers such as Ionesco and Beckett which is also useful as an approach to Webster's method of composition. Overall unity, Esslin rightly says, is one of theme and/or effect, thus echoing Miss Bradbrook's discussion of the poetic unity of the Elizabethan dramas. It develops out of

... an individual human being's intuition of the ultimate realities as he experiences them; the fruits of one man's descent into the depths of his personality, his dreams, fantasies and nightmares. ... one poet's most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation. ... This is the subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd, and it determines its form. ... 9

In effect, the author's form is the end result of whatever he chooses to use in presenting his subject matter. There are no prescribed rules to observe, anything is allowable if it
contributes in its own way to the final statement.

To this end, then—the presentation of his personal intuition of the basic truth of the human situation—Webster avails himself of any theatrical convention which will aid in conveying his vision to the audience, anything which will contribute to a thorough involvement of their attention. Thus, a concept of Total Theatre as postulated by Artaud can be distinctly relevant to *The Duchess of Malfi*: "... the Theater of Cruelty intends to reassert all the time-tested magical means of capturing the sensibility." The Theatre of Cruelty, concerned as it is with thorough involvement through a continual barrage of seemingly disparate elements directed towards the conscious and subconscious responses of an audience, makes a virtue of compositional diversity rather than a fault. "In a given time, to the greatest possible number of movements, we will join the greatest possible number of physical images and meanings attached to those movements." Total Theatre allows for the use of all the elements of the stage to serve the dramatist's intention:

The theater will never find itself again . . . except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitate of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism pour out on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior. In other terms, the theater must pursue by all its means a reassertion not only of all the aspects of the objective and descriptive external world but of the internal world; that is, of man considered metaphysically.
Enough has now been said, I feel, to suggest that we may profitably view Webster in a light of approval rather than disapproval for his theatrical variety. In outlining this variety below, my concern for the moment is simply with the variety in and of itself, and of the effectiveness of individual devices and conventions considered in and for themselves. The relevance of seemingly disparate elements to the total thematic unity of the work will be made clear, I hope, in the following chapters. Also, I make no attempt to trace any actual or possible sources of the elements used.\textsuperscript{13}

To clarify my contention that \textit{The Duchess of Malfi} may be seen within a context of Total Theatre, a twentieth century analogy seems relevant at this point. As mentioned earlier, the fullest contemporary realization of Artaud's concept of Total Theatre has been in Peter Brook's 1964 production of Weiss' \textit{Marat/Sade}. In his introduction to the English text of the play, Brook notes:

Weiss not only uses total theatre, that time-honoured notion of getting all the elements of the stage to serve the play. His force is not only in the quantity of instruments he uses; it is above all in the jangle produced by the clash of styles.

\textellipsis

One of the London critics attacked the play on the ground that it was a fashionable mixture of all the best theatrical ingredients around--Brechtian--didactic--absurdist--Theatre of Cruelty. He said this to disparage but I repeat this as praise. Weiss saw the use of every one of these idioms and he saw \textit{that} he needed them all.

And, from his work in transferring the text to the stage, Brook
felt that Weiss had successfully assimilated the many disparate elements used:

From our practical experience I can report that the force of the performance is directly related to the imaginative richness of the material: the imaginative richness is the consequence of the amount of levels that are working simultaneously: this simultaneity is the direct result of Weiss's daring combination of so many contradictory techniques.14

For Weiss, let us temporarily read Webster, forgetting the *Marat/Sade* and considering the relevance of the statement to *The Duchess of Malfi*. The exercise is all the more profitable if one notes that Brook's indication of "... the best theatrical ingredients around. ..." are all present in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Brechtian element, at least philosophically, is as much Webster's as it is Brecht's, and didactic and absurdist elements are also present in the play. For the moment, however, let us concern ourselves with the specifically dramatic and theatrical elements of the play which represent conventions indigenous to Webster's own time. This represents, I feel, Total Theatre as it was in effect practiced if not actually so named by a Jacobean dramatist.
CHAPTER II

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI AS TOTAL THEATRE

Assuming that The Duchess of Malfi is, as previously noted, "... one poet's most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation. . . ." it seems legitimate to suggest that despite its Italian setting, the play is meant to be a microcosmic representation of life everywhere, but more specifically of life in the England Webster lived in. Hence the play attempts to place on the stage as full and varied a representation as possible of the manifold concerns of a complex society: scenes of public and court life alternate with domestic, private scenes, the formality of the public scenes contrasting with the informality of the domestic scenes. Interiors and exteriors are used: receiving chambers, bedrooms, corridors, a courtyard, the open countryside, a prison, a graveyard, a religious shrine. The flexibility of the Elizabethan stage allowed for such constant movement and activity, and throughout the play, Webster places his central group of characters within the larger context of a busy and complex social machine. There is an undeniable aura of spectacle in the play just on the level of movement and activity alone.

Spectacle of a more specific nature is used in the scene (III.iv), also involving ritual and pageantry, of the Cardinal's investiture as a soldier, a scene which is not completely necessary to the actual plot, but which visually
makes an extremely important contribution to the over-all theme. Immediately following the Cardinal's installation, we have in dumb-show the representation of the banishment of the Duchess and Antonio, a scene which depends entirely on pantomime, gesture and physical movement for its effect. This particular point in the play is a useful one to help establish some idea of the frequent inter-play of a number of different levels of interpretation and response. There is, first and most simply, a basic plot situation: the Cardinal installed in the habit of a soldier, his sister and her husband seeking safety at the shrine where the ceremony takes place, their banishment by the Cardinal. On a character level, we have a visual representation of the Cardinal formally putting aside the garb of a man of the Church and taking up the dress of a fighter. In one sense, this gives a revelation of his true nature as we have seen it developing in the play; a visual confirmation of our feeling that the Cardinal is one who uses religion only as a cloak to disguise his true nature. In the garb of a soldier, he somehow looks much more appropriate, particularly in the context of the accompanying symbolic and ritualistic actions of his attendants "... delivering up his cross, hat, robes and ring at the shrine, and investing him with sword, helmet, shield and spurs; ... ." (III.iv.8).

On a more complex level of response, it seems significant that the banishment of the Duchess and Antonio takes place immediately following this ceremony, and on looking back, we
can realize that it is at this point that the persecution of the Duchess begins in earnest. From the pantomime, we can sense a deeper implication of the Cardinal's actions: the dissolution of the protection usually provided by a religious shrine, perhaps more generally even by religion itself. Similarly, also in pantomime (we must assume its presence from the pilgrim's comments a few lines later), we see the Cardinal tearing the Duchess' wedding ring from her finger. Here we are offered a visual suggestion of the imminent destruction of another established institution or custom.

All of the foregoing is suggested in purely visual terms. The force of gesture and facial expression cannot be under-estimated. The scene actually needs no verbal comment; the ensuing dialogue of the two Pilgrims is in many ways unnecessary, and actually decreases the spectacular effectiveness of what has just taken place. In *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud repeatedly writes of the strong communicative power of mime actions. After seeing one particular mime performance, he noted in his impressions "... the irresistible expressiveness of gesture; ... In the animated gesticulations and discontinuous unfolding of images there is a kind of direct physical appeal ... which memory will never release." After a performance of *The Duchess of Malfi*, I doubt that we would remember a single word of the pilgrims' commentary, but we would undoubtedly remember the dumb-show banishment.
We should also bear in mind that yet another level of response would be in operation due to the presence of musical accompaniment and the ritual chanting of the Churchmen, forming almost a mocking counter effect to our visual responses. The scene represents a significant turning point in the unfolding action, and it is of note that Webster chose to convey it entirely in theatrical terms—visually rather than verbally.

Ritual elements are also involved in the betrothal scene of I.i and the betrayal of Julia in V.ii, both scenes also depending heavily on the visual for full realization. In fact, it is difficult to think of any important scene in the play which does not depend heavily on theatrical realization for its effectiveness: the betrothal scene, the confrontation of Antonio and Bosola in the courtyard, the intrusion of Ferdinand into the Duchess' bedroom, the scene at Ancona, the torture and death of the Duchess, Ferdinand's mad scene, the echo scene, the death of Julia, and the various murders and intrigues at the close of the play.

In his first manifesto for a Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud, who had little use for the modern theatre's dependency on dialogue to convey meaning, advocated in his planned program the staging of "Works from the Elizabethan theater stripped of their text and retaining only the accouterments of period, situations, characters and action." As further revealed in his short discussion of the physical impact of
Ford's 'Tis Pity She's A Whore,⁴ Artaud seemingly had a strong sense of the importance of the visual image as a vital contributing factor to the audience's apprehension of thematic implications of a given work. What is surprising is to consider just how much of the total effect of The Duchess of Malfi depends on visual realization, despite the fact that Webster's poetic imagery is what has brought him enduring recognition and praise. The poetry of the play supports and extends the implications of the visual imagery. If the play in outline form were to become the basis for a mime scenario and were consequently played as such it would, I think, retain its thematic implications as revealed through visual image and character in action. The onus would be placed on the expressive power of gesture and movement to convey the meaning of key scenes. Stripped of its textual ambiguity, the revenge of Ferdinand against his sister might be then seen in its essence as pure, motiveless cruelty. Its terror would not be lessened, but greatly heightened due to the complete absence of a verbal direction of the audience's reactions and sympathies. In the play, visual and verbal images seem to run parallel to each other, so that in effect we have a double statement of theme: one visual, one verbal, and also a double revelation of character: one visual, one verbal. I will return to this idea in the next chapter. For the moment, let us continue to look at the theatrical elements of The Duchess of Malfi.
It is interesting to note that following the scene at Ancona, ritual elements, normally associated with order and harmony, are used for perverted purposes and become grotesque versions of our usual associations of ritual functions. Julia kisses the Bible, a ritual confirmation of the oath of secrecy she has just given; the book is poisoned, and her life ends. In IV.i, the Duke offers the Duchess his hand to kiss, a ritual sign of accepting and receiving forgiveness, but the hand turns out to be the severed hand of a dead man; the meaning inherent in the ceremony is mocked, perverted and nullified.

Indeed, a strange pattern of perverted ritual seems to underline all of the torture scenes (IV.i and ii) which culminate in the death of the Duchess. This ritual motif has been interpreted in a variety of ways, all of them suggestive, none really conclusive.\(^5\) Clifford Leech's suggestions are most useful. Ritual, he feels, "... schematises human belief or aspiration or need, thus both asserting the mental condition it expresses and at the same time unburdening that condition. ... So Ferdinand and Bosola arrange their variant of a black mass."\(^6\) It seems possible to see the entire sequence of IV.i and ii as a ritualization by Ferdinand of his desires and needs and as a visual assertion of his mental condition.

Leech makes a further relevant point:

And for us, who have been fascinated and tormented by the ceremony but never acquiescent in it, the effect is no less complex, no mere thrill of horror. It is informed
by our realization of its source in the minds of those who have stage-managed it, and by a growing sense of what it will do to them.7

In relation to the concept of cruelty in the theatre, Leech's note of our fascination by the ritual/ceremony is highly informative. The machinations of Ferdinand elicit, I think, an unformed, unintellectual empathy in the audience. Theatre of Cruelty provides an outlet for our repressions. In his essay comparing the theatrical experience to the presence in a community of a plague, Artaud suggests:

The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: . . . . It recovers the notion of symbols and archetypes which act like silent blows, rests, leaps of the heart . . . inflammatory images thrust into our abruptly wakened heads.8

Much has been made of the so-called Senecan horror devices used by Webster in the persecution scene. But, regardless of whatever specific traditions he drew upon, Webster does not include a severed hand, representations of dead bodies, madmen, murder and torture simply as extraneous titillations for the audience. This is not to say that he was unaware of their theatrical effectiveness and popularity. The point becomes, rather, why were such things so popular? As mentioned, in IV.i and ii we seem close to Artaud's concept of theatre as an outlet for, and an externalization of, our repressions. In "The Theater and the Plague," Artaud further notes:
like the plague, it [i.e., the theatre] is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized. . . . . It releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theater, but of life.9

One can begin to perceive here the implications of this horror show which we as audience members watch in undeniable fascination. If a mirror were suddenly held in front of our faces as we watched, perhaps we would be horrified by the sight of our own engrossment in cruelty, torture and murder represented before us. We would thus have a sudden and painful insight into ourselves. In the Theatre of Cruelty, the stage area becomes this mirror; a reflection of our latent and suppressed proclivities. This, I think, was what Webster was trying to do in this long fourth act sequence—trying to reach a deeper level of awareness than one of superficial interest in plot and characters. To do this, he made full use of the theatre and its resources to evoke the insight. As we shall see in a later section, his dialogue and poetic imagery were also working for this effect, in harmony with the visual imagery.

T.S. Eliot senses in Elizabethan drama a release in the theatre of tastes and attitudes which were held under tenuous restraint in everyday life. Tastes gratified in the theatre are always latent in the audience, he feels. A point he makes about Seneca's influence is most relevant to the
The worst that can be urged against Seneca, in the matter of responsibility for what is disgusting in Elizabethan drama, is that he may have provided the dramatist with a pretext or justification for horrors which were not Senecan at all, for which there was certainly a taste, and the taste for which would certainly have been gratified at that time whether Seneca had ever written or not. Thus, Seneca's responsibility for the horror and bloodshed of a play such as *The Duchess of Malfi* can be seen as minimal; he, by way of earlier English dramatists such as Kyd, undoubtedly provided the conventions, but the reason for their use by Webster is because of their distinct relevance to his view of man and society. Further support for this view is found in Lord David Cecil's essay on Webster: "The wild and bloody conventions of Elizabethan melodrama provided a most appropriate vehicle for conveying his hell-haunted vision of human existence."

Another theatrical tradition is at work in at least part of the persecution sequence, namely Webster's inclusion of a dance of madmen. There is a parallel between Webster's use of dancing and his use of ritual. Just as the comforts and order normally associated with ritual are stripped away in the play, so the traditional ideas of order, balance and harmony as expressed by the dance--particularly in the formal masque form--are here reversed. The dance of madmen expresses disorder, a loss of balance and harmony in the world of the play. In one sense this dance is a key image in the play,
again visual, and a natural consequence of the earlier image of the abandonment of tradition and order as suggested in the Ancona dumb-show. As with this earlier image, the importance of the dance form as gesture, movement and expression must be noted. In *The Elizabethan World Picture*, E.M.W. Tillyard mentions the idea of the cosmic dance, the concept—adopted in the masque form—of harmony and order reflected in movement, the order of the universe seen as a dance. Presumably, the tradition of the anti-masque evolved as contrast—disharmony which would be contrasted with the order of the masque proper. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, we have only an anti-masque. What follows is not an orderly expression of harmony to reassure us, but rather the entrance of Bosola and, soon after, the Duchess' executioners. In her extremely useful article, "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster," Inga-Stina Ekeblad examines this sequence in terms of its masque elements, and observes that the dance... acts as an ideograph of the dis-unity, the in-coherence of the Duchess' world. It acts as a visual and aural image of what the action of the play has led to. As an expression in dance of a world-gone-mad-motif, Webster has obviously brought another level of response into play through his use of another form of theatre. Clifford Leech feels that the madmen's scene and dance represent a concrete image of the play as a whole in that they signify the final dissolution of an apparently (i.e., deceptively) ordered world. This is an important point, in that it
allows us to see the relevance of Act V to the total plan of the play. Despite its loose structure, it is not extraneous, but shows a world totally without order and value. We should also keep in mind the concept of the stage as microcosm. The dance of the madmen comments on the world of the play, and in turn, as we have noted, the world of the play is intended as a reflection of the world outside the theatre.

If Act IV depends heavily on stage performance for full effectiveness, Act V is every bit as theatrical in content. Frequently regarded as somewhat extraneous and belaboured, it is rather an extension of the implications of the dance of madmen and ensuing death of the Duchess in Act IV. It is a highly physical act—movement, activity, confusion are constant. If the act seems disorganized and fragmentary, perhaps it is intentionally so; it mirrors the condition of the Malfi world. In a sense the act is an elaborate development of a remark made by Bosola just before he stabs the Cardinal:

\[. . . \text{when thou kill'd'st thy sister,} \\
\text{Thou took'ist from Justice her most equal balance,} \\
\text{And left her naught but her sword.} \\
\text{(V.v.39-41)}\]

The sword is the most predominant stage prop throughout Act V. The outcome of everything is death. But visually an important point can be made; one which is made textually, but which can only be fully appreciated in performance. The deaths are extremely grotesque—Julia dies kissing a poisoned book; Bosola stabs Antonio by mistake; the Cardinal's clever plan to allow
him to dispose of Julia's body is the cause of his downfall on Bosola's sword, who has also killed a servant immediately beforehand; Ferdinand, in his madness, gives his brother another death blow, also stabs Bosola, who in turn manages to stab Ferdinand before he dies himself. Condensed as above, the action is not only grotesque but almost comical in its movements; it is "comic" but in a way too terrible to be really funny. The sequence conveys the truth of Kernan's statement that in The Duchess of Malfi "The metaphors which the satirist traditionally uses to describe the filthiness and idiocy of mankind now become literal realities before our eyes." Admittedly, there is a precarious balance between the grotesque and the merely silly which would vary from production to production. What is important theatrically is to convey visually the obvious fact that nobody merely passes away quietly—the Duchess and Cariola in Act IV and Julia, Antonio, the Cardinal, Ferdinand and Bosola in Act V all die noisy, violent, cruel and—relevant to a later discussion but worth noting here—man inflicted deaths. This is a society controlled, organized, operated and destroyed by man alone. I think a visual suggestion of this has been given much earlier in the play—in the symbolic implications of the Cardinal abandoning the robes of religion and taking on the garb of an active, fighting man of the world.

The various theatrical elements outlined above work in conjunction with various dramatic elements (i.e., conven-
tions of character and plot) which are also not all original with Webster, but are nevertheless put to original use by him. On one level, The Duchess of Malfi is a love story, and we see Webster again using the structural principle of contrast, analogous to his contrasts between traditional and perverted rituals and masque and anti-masque, to differentiate between the normal and healthy love of the Duchess and Antonio and the lust and sexuality of the relationship between Julia and the Cardinal, or Julia in association with Bosola and Delio. Character contrasts are, of course, also implied. The Machiavellian stage figure is used by Webster in his characterization of the Cardinal and, to a lesser extent, Ferdinand, although the latter might be as easily seen as Webster's version of a Humour Character. Their work is carried out by a tool villain, a stock figure created afresh by Webster in the character of Bosola. Intrigue and deception, standard plot devices of revenge tragedy, are utilized throughout the play, but here again the important concept of the play as microcosm is relevant. It is not only that this type of plot was theatrically interesting; to Webster it was, as everything, relevant to his view of society.

Three somewhat more general concerns need mention in discussing the theatrical composition of a work like The Duchess of Malfi: the importance of music, lighting and acting in the over-all realization of the work as Total Theatre. We should, I think, regard the use of music as of primary
importance to Webster. We have no way of knowing, of course, just how much incidental music appeared throughout the action. In a modern production of the work, one attempting to realize the theories of Artaud, music would be greatly used. It can set a mood or atmosphere almost instantaneously, it can underscore dramatic action throughout, underline or punctuate certain significant passages. Also, its appeal is, in keeping with Artaud's concept of theatre, primarily sensory rather than intellectual. In a work like *The Duchess of Malfi* it can and should be made to work upon the nerves of the spectator. An indication of this function is given at the opening of IV.ii: "What hideous noise was that?" the Duchess asks, indicating to an astute director that at this particular point in the play, discordant music could have an important emotional impact on an audience.

However, even in Webster's time there is considerable reason to suspect that music was much more used than the texts of surviving works actually indicate. In *Malfi*, the instalment of the Cardinal in the garb of a soldier, and the ensuing dumb show banishment of the Duchess and Antonio was, as suggested in the text, entirely underscored with music and vocal chanting: "... during all which ceremony, this ditty is sung, to very solemn music, by divers Churchmen; ..." (III.iv.s.d. below 1.5). There is ample opportunity for its use throughout IV.i and ii. "Here, by a Madman, this song is sung, to a dismal kind of music." the directions
indicate at IV.ii.60. Later in the scene (1.112), the dance of madmen takes place, "... with music answerable thereunto. ...", and music would presumably accompany the Executioner's entrance with the coffin. Beyond these specific indications, one can only speculate on the amount of incidental music actually used. I prefer to speculate that it was considerable. It seems highly likely, for example, that the Echo sequence in V.iii would have had some form of musical underscoring.

The importance of lighting to contribute to mood, atmosphere and setting of a modern production is so obvious that it need not be elaborated upon. However, it is interesting to speculate on the possibility of rudimentary experimentation with some type of lighting effects being possible in a production of The Duchess of Malfi in Webster's own time. In his introduction to the play, John Russell Brown suggests this possibility at least with respect to early performances at the private and indoor Blackfriars Theatre. For example,

... the incident of the dead man's hand, following the line 'Take hence the lights' in IV. i. of The Duchess, has a shock effect that depends on a partially darkened stage. ... What would be difficult, clumsy, and grotesque at the Globe, would be thrilling and sensitive in the darkened auditorium of the Blackfriars.17

Considerable visual interest could be added to a scene such as II.iii when Antonio and Bosola meet in the courtyard if, at the Blackfriars, it was played on a darkened stage with some use made of lanterns and torches; an atmospheric effect
would be evoked which would be impossible on the stage at the Globe. Although the Globe spectators were of course accustomed to receiving atmosphere through the poet's language, it is obvious that the emotional response would be enhanced in a darkened auditorium. Similarly, the last two scenes of the play, a night setting abounding with furtive figures scurrying about and identities mistaken in the darkness would be greatly enhanced by some type of lighting effect, however rudimentary.

The violence of the story line of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the violence of stage business, necessitates a corresponding violence and energy in the acting. It is important to keep in mind the physicality of Elizabethan acting standards, the amount of energy expelled not only in vocal expression, but also in movement and gesture. It is a style which is right for the play, and yet one which modern audiences, conditioned to realism in acting, find stilted and embarrassing. Yet, the physicality and formal nature (by our standards) of Elizabethan acting, the importance of bodily movement and gesture, are not unrelated to the qualities in acting which Artaud felt necessary for a Theatre of Cruelty: an acting style which is exaggerated and extremely dependent on violent and extravagant gestures. Muriel Bradbrook mentions the importance of gesture, pose, facial distortion in Elizabethan acting, much of it resulting, logically, from the particular necessities of acting in open air conditions.¹⁸
Throughout this chapter I have been concerned primarily with the content variety of *The Duchess of Malfi* and the particular effectiveness of Webster’s use of various conventions and forms. No attempt has yet been made to relate disparate elements and momentary effects to a totality of effect. The next chapter attempts to make some integration of the various elements outlined above into a unified whole. I have chosen to approach the theme of the play in this manner because of the earlier mentioned idea of cumulative effect. In performance, assuming complete ignorance of the work before we entered the theatre, our reaction would build slowly. Individual scenes and segments of dialogue, which we may have seen or heard before, would have an immediate effect on us, and yet only at the end of the play could we make any attempt at an assessment of what we had just seen, any attempt to draw a coherent theme from the unfolding pattern. A further quotation from Esslin’s *Theatre of the Absurd* is of use at this point. A play which is centered around a poetic image is constructed in a somewhat different manner from a realistic play attempting to reproduce a segment of life on the stage:

The total action of the play, instead of proceeding from Point A to Point B, as in other dramatic conventions, gradually builds up the complex pattern of the poetic image that the play expresses. The spectator's suspense consists in waiting for the gradual completion of this pattern which will enable him to see the image as a whole. And only when that image is assembled--after the final curtain--can he begin to explore, not so much its meaning as its structure, texture, and impact.
I suggested earlier that the most important moments of the play were expressed in visual images which could stand by themselves without supporting verbal comment. I feel that the image which best expresses the play as a whole is—assuming it could be "frozen" and lifted from the play to be looked at in isolation—the instant of the Duchess' death. However, to fully understand this image, and all that has led up to it and subsequently evolves from it, Webster has utilized a variety of methods to present, in pantomime, in dance, in song, in dialogue, in action, a whole complex of images which rebound off this central visual image. Esslin is again useful at this point:

... in a dramatic form that presents a concretized poetic image the play's extension in time is purely incidental. Expressing an intuition in depth, it should ideally be apprehended in a single moment, and only because it is physically impossible to present so complex an image in an instant does it have to be spread over a period of time. The formal structure of such a play is, therefore, merely a device to express a complex total image by unfolding it in a sequence of interacting elements.20

In effect, what has been said about the visual image of the Duchess' death as expressive of the meaning of the play must be qualified somewhat in the light of Esslin's statement. This central image, in isolation, would not be understood. But, in relation to the complex of images throughout the play, as presented in a variety of ways, the image becomes clearly understandable. A full discussion of Webster's total image is the concern of the following chapter.
The point of the preceding chapter has been to develop the contention that in the theatrical realization of his vision, Webster uses a Total Theatre concept which allows for the inclusion of seemingly incongruous elements. Thus if a compositional unity is seen to be impossible, we must now look for the unity of thought and/or theme out of which both the visual and the verbal imagery of *The Duchess of Malfi* has evolved.
CHAPTER III

THEMATIC UNITY IN THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

The basic purpose of this chapter is to show how, despite the great diversity of his material, Webster maintained a consistent point of view throughout The Duchess of Malfi through a close correlation between visual and verbal images within a coherent thematic pattern. Thematic unity is of primary importance to the concept of Theatre of Cruelty. As George E. Wellwarth notes in his chapter on Artaud in The Theater of Protest and Paradox: "... Artaud sees drama as a set of important themes floating around amorphously, ready to be shaped into whatever form the all-powerful metteur en scène (a combination of producer, director, and author in Artaud's system) wishes to give them."¹

We have already seen the various theatrical and dramatic devices used in The Duchess of Malfi. These elements all contribute to a form of unity which Madeline Doran calls "... qualitative unity."² In Endeavors of Art she makes reference to this type of unity as it appears in Shakespeare's plays, but also attests to its presence in the work of Marlowe, Jonson, Chapman and Webster:

In this field, Shakespeare is once more the master. He learned how to relate his songs in theme or tone to the action of his plays, how to give a play its own peculiar emotional coloring with the dominant imagery, how to weave a pattern of echoes and contrasts in words and
images which everywhere works with the action, how to vary verse and prose not merely with the rank and nature of the characters, according to the rules of decorum, but also with changes in attitude, in emotional tension, in the tone desired for the scene.

From the above statement, we should note the applicability of two phrases to Webster, both of which denote the primary concerns of this chapter: "... dominant imagery. ..." and "... a pattern of echoes and contrasts in words and images which everywhere works with the action. ..."

Cecil W. Davies suggests that the play's themes are presented twice, once in the action and again in the poetic imagery:

... the two modes of expression being superimposed the one on the other, and fused in the appropriate linguistic medium, which thus communicates a single experience to the audience.

He concludes:

The themes are dramatically embodied in characters and in the developing situations between them, while a consistently and suitably textured vehicle of language is used not simply to convey their story in dramatic dialogue, but also to involve these characters, in our imagination, in a world of imagery also associated with the themes.

Hereward T. Price takes a comparable view of Webster's technique, seeing a double construction through the inter-actions of figure in action and figure in language, the one reinforcing the other. What, then, are these themes which are revealed by both the characters in action (i.e., the visual
imagery) and the poetic imagery?

Basically, I am concerned with how fully The Duchess of Malfi reveals a working out, albeit within a narrative context, of the basic thematic aim of a Theatre of Cruelty:

As Artaud saw it, what was wrong with drama, as well as with all the other arts, was culture. By "culture" Artaud meant the overlay of artificialities that civilization had imposed upon human nature. The essence of human nature, its basic and intrinsic quality, had become obscured by the unreal formal masks—the socially acceptable behaviour patterns arbitrarily imposed on us by custom and tradition. Since art is reality, the artist's task was to strip away the layers of artificiality and expose the core of reality that had been hidden for so long. To Artaud this core was pure emotion; and the emotion was latent, instinctual savagery. He perceived that men are, as they always have been, basically barbaric, that the thick protective walls of urbane, civilized behaviour they have acquired through centuries of hiding from psychological self-realization is easily crumbled by a forceful appeal to irrational emotion.

During the course of the action of Webster's play, the protective walls of civilized behaviour crumble, one by one, until, in the final scenes of the play, the essence of human nature is revealed. Webster's play deals in its final two acts with instinctive human desires—anger, hate, lust, physical contact, with man seen as animal.

Davies sees the scene involving the dance of the madmen as a key to the meaning of the play, and it is useful to begin an investigation of Webster's themes with this scene, since it provides such an excellent example of the parallel functioning of visual and verbal imagery. As noted in the last chapter, the dance of madmen expresses an anti-masque
motif of a world gone mad, a world without order or harmony. Davies comments on the grotesque qualities of its imagery, which remind him of the fantastic images of Hieronimus Bosch. We should note that the poetic images expressed by the madmen also indicate a world gone mad, without comfort or security; a world in which gross and demoniac forces predominate:

As ravens, screech owls, bulls, and bears,  
We'll bill and bawl our parts,  
Till irksome noise have cloy'd your ears  
And corrosiv'd your hearts.  
(IV.ii.65-68)

indicates a madman in the entry song. The images which the intruders then proceed to bill and bawl are all extremely physical, grotesque and somewhat revolting. The appeal of the imagery is sensory; it seems meant to work upon our nerves or, as the madman intimates in his song, to cloy our ears and corrode our hearts. One madman cannot sleep; his pillow is stuffed with a litter of porcupines. Another sees a vision of hell where "... the devils are continually blowing up women's souls, on hollow irons, and the fire never goes out." Another madman suggests that his pothecary "... makes alum of his wife's urine, and sells it to puritans that have sore throats with over-straining." The third madman is accused of being a "... snuffling knave, that while he shows the tombs, will have his hand in a wench's placket." The devil's nails have been pared, roasted in raven's eggs and used to cure agues; three hundred milch-bats are needed to make a
sleeping posset. And in the midst of all this, or immediately following, they break into their grotesque dance. (IV.ii.73-113.) Here, as Davies says, is a scene which is central to the plot and image structure of the play, one which presents both visually and verbally the concept of a world gone mad—and it is this world which destroys the Duchess. Madness surrounds the Duchess in her final hours, and she seems to recognize her solitude amidst it. When the Executioners arrive, Cariola advises her to call for help. "To whom? to our next neighbours? they are mad-folks." she replies (IV.ii.198). This can, I think, be construed not only as a specific note of the presence of the eight madmen who have just visited her, but as a general awareness of the omnipresence of violence and disorder.

If we take the scene of the dance of madmen and the immediately following execution of the Duchess as a central statement of basic thematic lines in the play, four ideas emerge. They are to some extent inter-related, but I think enough differentiation is possible that they can be discussed separately. Present in the scene, and operative throughout

The Duchess of Malfi are the following:

a. The idea of a world without order and harmony, in large measure resulting from--

b. The breakdown of traditional institutions and safeguards.

c. The helplessness of the individual in a world of violence where traditional safeguards no longer afford protection.

d. The concept of man as animal.
The whole idea of *The Duchess of Malfi* as related to the concept of a world of madness and violence is basic to the play's assimilation into the framework of a Theatre of Cruelty, a form of theatre which wishes to convey the horror and brutality of a society which, outside the theatre, indulges in horror and brutality. In his opening speech, Antonio observes that

```plaintext
... a prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver drops in general: but if 't chance
Some curs'd example poison 't near the head,
Death, and diseases through the whole land spread.
(I.i.11-15)
```

The rest of the play shows the truth of Antonio's aphorism. Near the head of the court are the Cardinal and Ferdinand: "... like plum-trees, that grow/crooked over standing pools; they are rich, and o'erladen/ with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed/on them. ..." (I.i.49-52). Their ensuing misuse of power and usurpation of their sister's rights as head of the court shows how within the play they are the concrete and visible causes of the world's madness: "The manner in which this violent attack on the everyday is to be accomplished involves a fantastic, larger-than-life callousness that enables the characters to disregard the amenities of social behaviour. ..." The situation is further complicated by the fact that one brother is a representative of the Church, and his misuse of power causes an even further breakdown in traditional institutions.
Webster's delineation of a world without order and harmony is echoed and repeated in various ways throughout the play. Visually, it is centered in Act IV, in the sequence already noted, and, after the death of the Duchess, becomes the dominant image of Act V, in which violence and intrigue are everywhere. In the verbal imagery, it is a constantly recurring motif. Just before declaring her love to Antonio, the Duchess asks her maid to:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{--wish me good speed} \\
&\text{For I am going into a wilderness,} \\
&\text{Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew} \\
&\text{To be my guide.}
\end{align*}
\]

(I.i.358-360)

The Duchess thus seems aware that there will be repercussions from her defiance of her brothers, although she has no real concept of the reality of the wilderness which we are to see manifested in the play. The connotations of wilderness give us an early inkling of the disorder to follow. It is intimated again by the position of the stars when Antonio calculates the horoscope of his newborn son:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The lord of the first house,} \\
\text{Being combust in the ascendant, signifies short life: and Mars} \\
\text{being in a human sign, joined to the tail of the Dragon, in the} \\
\text{eighth house, doth threaten a violent death; . . . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

(II.iii.60-63)

Here we should note the tension generating connotations of combust, short life, the tail of the Dragon, threaten, violent death.
The beginning of the actual breakdown of order, the initiation of the madness which is to dominate until the close of the play occurs in II.v when Ferdinand and the Cardinal learn of their sister's actions. An image Webster gives us brilliantly foreshadows what in effect happens later in the play:

Card. Why do you make yourself
So wild a tempest?
Ferd. Would I could be one,
That I might toss her palace 'bout her ears,
Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads,
And lay her general territory as waste
As she hath done her honours.

(II.v.17-21)

Thereafter, Ferdinand's rage carries him "As men convey'd by witches through the air,/On violent whirlwinds. . . ." (II. v.49-50). When he leaves his sister's residence this image is again repeated:

Bos. The duke your brother is ta'en up in a whirlwind,
Hath took horse, and's rid post to Rome.

(III.ii.161-162)

Reason, tolerance and moderation disappear from Webster's dramatic world and the madmen take over. In terms of a Theatre of Cruelty one could thus say that the veneer of civilized behaviour is stripped away and instinct takes over from reason: hence Cruelty, the manifestation of irrational and uncontrollable impulses, appears in full force. In this context, it is important to note that Ferdinand himself goes
insane after his sister's death, but that in essence this "insanity" is only a label given by society to one whose sub-human impulses are no longer held under restraint. Ferdinand in Act V is Webster's view of quintessential man, a view which one would expect would also have been presented choreographically in the dance of "madmen" in Act IV.

The confusion and tension of a world without order and harmony is further revealed in the brief but incisive observation by the Duchess "...—my hair tangles.", just before the entrance of her brother (III.iii.53), and, after he leaves:

I stand
As if a mine, beneath my feet, were ready
To be blown up.

(III.ii.155-157)

In philosophical terms, Webster's depiction of a world devoid of order amounts to a smashing of what we could call, after E.M.W. Tillyard's definitive study, the Elizabethan World Picture. Degree and harmony are absent in the later sections of The Duchess of Malfi, and in Act V there is no governing force left but force itself. As Alexander Allison observes:

Though no subsequent happenings can attain the mystery and terror of the duchess's murder, malicious and deceitful motives then multiply and the interaction between them becomes the play's sole business.10

I would suggest that it is not the Duchess who upsets degree by a marriage beneath her station, but rather Ferdinand and
the Cardinal, with Bosola's assistance, who do so by paying no heed to their sister's prerogatives as a ruler. As was previously noted, the disharmony of the Malfi world results from their taking the law into their own hands—or rather from their complete disregard of the law. The Duchess' only real mistake was perhaps in placing too much faith on her invulnerability. What she learns is by implication what the audience is supposed to learn. Artaud would put it as follows:

We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all.\(^1\)

In Webster's own day, this idea was expressed probably most memorably in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*:

\[
\begin{align*}
0, \text{ when degree is shak'd,} \\
\text{Which is the ladder to all high designs,} \\
\text{The enterprise is sick.} & \ldots \\
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \\
\text{Take but degree away, untune that string,} \\
\text{And hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets} & \ldots \\
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \\
\text{Strength should be lord of imbecility,} \\
\text{And the rude son should strike his father dead.} \\
\text{Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,} \\
\text{Between whose endless jar justice resides,} \\
\text{Should lose her names, and so should justice too.} \\
\text{Then everything includes itself in power,} \\
\text{Power into will, will into appetite,} \\
\text{And appetite, an. universal wolf,} \\
\text{So doubly seconded with will and power,} \\
\text{Must make perforce an universal prey} & \ldots \\
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \\
\text{And last eat up himself.} & \ldots
\end{align*}
\]

Albeit written earlier than *The Duchess of Malfi*, we might
profitably read this Shakespearean passage as a very condensed summation of the theme of Acts IV and V of Webster's play. The rude son does not strike his father dead, but two brothers do destroy their sister who is, in terms of degree, above them. Right and wrong do cease to be operative terms, power becomes everything, Ferdinand's "madness" is diagnosed as lycanthropy, and, to complete the relevance of the quotation, at the end of The Duchess of Malfi we see evil destroying itself by preying on its own kind. One is reminded of Jan Kott's comment on King Lear, which seems even more relevant to our play:

> All bonds, all laws, whether divine, natural or human, are broken. Social order, from the kingdom to the family, will crumble into dust. There are no longer king and subjects, fathers and children, husbands and wives. There are only huge Renaissance monsters, devouring one another like beasts of prey.\(^{13}\)

Webster gives one expression of the discord in the following words of the Duchess:

> I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow.
> Th' heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass,
> The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad: ... ... (IV.ii..24-26)

He gives us a play intended to convey this over-all chaos of life without order through the delineation of violence and chaos on the stage. Visually, we have the extended tortures of the fourth act. Verbally we have such images as:
Ferd. I would have their bodies
Burnt in a coal-pit, with the vcntage stopp'd,
That their curs'd smoke might not ascend to heaven:
Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur,
Wrap them in't, and then light them like a match;
Or else to boil their bastard to a cullis,
And give 't his lecherous father, to renew
The sin of his back.

(II. v. 67-73)

A breakdown or absence of order and harmony in society,
with the ensuing triumph of irrational forces, when felt by a
dramatist, can result theatrically in one of two things: a
wish to reassure us as to the eventual return of permanent
laws and human "dignity", or a wish to shock us into an aware­
ness of conditions as they are. I feel that generally whereas
Shakespeare chooses the former approach, Webster chooses the
latter. Webster's instruction comes through his attempts to,
in terms of a Theatre of Cruelty, shatter the complacencies
of the spectator and shock his sensibilities at the same
time; to bring the spectator to an awareness of the truths
of society, of himself, and of life in general. Webster's
attitude is, I feel, not so much one of disgust with life as
of an intense perception of and concern with its brutality,
horror and ugliness. His is an anarchic view of life, but it
is not totally nihilistic. In his introduction to the play,
John Russell Brown notes a unity in The Duchess of Malfi of
"... empirical, responsible, sceptical, unsurprised, and
deeply perceptive concern for the characters and society
portrayed." 14
Returning to the image of the dance of madmen and the torture of the Duchess, the presence of the second major theme of the play—the breakdown of traditional institutions and safeguards—is apparent when we note that the persecution of the Duchess is carried out by her brothers. Family values, regarded as a fundamental nucleus of any social structure, are of no meaning in Webster's dramatic world.

You have bloodily approv'd the ancient truth,  
That kindred commonly do worse agree  
Than remote strangers.

is Bosola's summation of this aspect of the theme (IV.i.270-272). In Webster's plays, such terms as mother, sister, brother and husband cease to have any real value; they become empty nominatives of address, nothing more. The one exception in the work under consideration is the Duchess, who places too much faith in the protective responsibilities of a husband and her brothers. Antonio does not seem to reciprocate; wife to him is an empty term, or at least it becomes so when his own safety is at issue. He is ready enough to abandon his responsibilities as a husband to save his own neck, trusting in the laws of kinship to preserve the Duchess from harsh treatment by her brothers. This idea, the emptiness of family relationships, had already appeared in The White Devil and was to re-appear in The Devil's Law-Case. Webster seemed to feel that the rottenness of the social structure extended to its most basic and usually most stable and inviolable unit:
Perhaps men would like to believe that the institutions of religion, law, and family are expressions of universal decorum; but these institutions seem fragile defenses against the anarchy of human passion. ... Before sexual and mercenary appetites and before the brutal coercions of wealth and place, traditional sanctities are meaningless: brother, sister, husband, wife become empty terms.

The institutions of religion and law are also misused by Webster's villains. He suggests this very early in the play. The Cardinal

... is a melancholy churchman; the spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads; where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than ever was imposed on Hercules, for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters. He should have been Pope; but instead of coming to it by the primitive decency of the church, he did bestow bribes so largely, and so impudently, as if he would have carried it away without heaven's knowledge. 

(Ant. I.i.157-166)

while with regard to the workings of the law, Ferdinand

... speaks with others' tongues, and hears men's suits With others' ears; will seem to sleep o'th' bench Only to entrap offenders in their answers; Dooms men to death by information, Rewards by hearsay.

(Ant. I.i.172-176)

and thus

Then the law to him
Is like a foul black cobweb to a spider--
He makes it his dwelling, and a prison
To entangle those shall feed him.

(Delio. I.i.177-180)

By their actions throughout the play, the two brothers reveal
their inner corruption.

As was mentioned earlier, the dumb-show banishment scene conveys in visual terms the deceptiveness of traditional safeguards associated with religion, a religion which, at least in terms of what we see, has a person like the Cardinal as its highest representative. Religion in Webster's play, as centered in the Cardinal, seems controlled by the devil. This is suggested in a variety of ways. In imagery, the presence of the devil's influence is suggested early in the play when Antonio observes of the Cardinal:

They that do flatter him most say oracles
Hang at his lips: and verily I believe them;
For the devil speaks in them.

(I.i.184-186)

In the prison scene, Bosola tells the Duchess she must live; she then equates her world with hell, where the greatest torture is that souls must continue to live and suffer, and cannot die (IV.i.70-72). Also, the situation of the Duchess is surely implied in the madman's image formerly cited: "Hell is a mere glass-house, where the devils/ are continually blowing up women's souls, on hollow/ irons, and the fire never goes out." (IV.ii.77-79.) Late in the play, the Cardinal is puzzled by a recurring vision:

When I look into the fish-ponds, in my garden,
Methinks I see a thing, arm'd with a rake
That seems to strike at me:--

(V.v.5-7)
The implications of hell on earth, or of the earth as the devil's terrain, seem present throughout the play, both as a motif in the imagery and as an underlying principle of the action. This allows one, if he so wishes, to see the violence and cruelty of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the delineation of the workings of the irrational, as the work of the Devil. It is a credit to Webster that this work can be meaningfully interpreted in religious terms as well as psychological and philosophical.

Webster wisely does not commit himself one way or the other on the presence of the Devil or the absence of God in his dramatic world. But the implication seems obvious for those who want it. As Ornstein notes

... we must remember that the ethical and intellectual substance of a Jacobean tragedy includes more than the sum of ideas expounded or referred to in its pages. The dramatist's vision is also, and more importantly, expressed in character, in plot, and in the total poetic impression of life which his play creates.16

In this context, Lord David Cecil sees Webster's world in terms of an extreme Calvinist point of view, i.e., evil is innate, more pervasive and powerful than the forces of good. In effect, Cecil sees *The Duchess of Malfi* as a simple struggle between good and evil—or, in theological terms, between Heaven and Hell.17 Theatrically, this is an extremely relevant point if we keep in mind that in as heterogeneous an audience as attended the theatre in Webster's day, or for that matter our
own, the various thematic implications of a work such as *The Duchess of Malfi* are not going to be readily grasped by everyone. But in its simplest form, the opposition between forces of good and evil, the meaning of the play, and its overall implications in relation to a world outside the theatre, is available to everyone. I will return to this point in more detail in discussing characterization. One further point is worth noting in considering the implications in the play of the pervasiveness of the influences of Evil, the Devil, Hell, the irrational, the instinctual—or whatever one personally chooses to name the influence. If I were asked to place Webster within a religious scheme or tradition, Calvinism would seem most logical: "Webster is imitating a fallen mankind in a fallen world." However, it is also tempting, however erroneous in fact, to see him as Manichean, with a belief in the earth as the devil's terrain, the inherent evil tendencies of man and matter, and the accompanying belief in the forces of darkness eventually triumphing over light.

To return to the central issue, there is thus present as a thematic implication in *The Duchess of Malfi* a sense of the breakdown of traditional values inherent in religion, in law and order, and in the family unit. These are the restraints which Artaud felt must be broken through to reveal man in his true light. Ornstein offers the best summation of this particular thematic line, noting that we are left with a terrifying sense of the *fragility* of the social structure:
we are made to feel how vulnerable are the walls—the political, religious, legal and familial institutions—which seek to check or contain the uncivilized fury of civilized man.\textsuperscript{19}

The motif of the world gone mad, and the corresponding suggestion of the breakdown of traditional safeguards of law and order, extending even to the sanctity of the family unit, leads to a brief consideration of a third aspect of Webster's total vision, namely the sense of the helplessness of the sane/rational individual (i.e., the Duchess) in the midst of chaos. Indifference and concomitant hostility towards the Duchess are manifested on three levels. Muriel Bradbrook feels that cosmic malignancy is suggested in the configurations revealed in the horoscope cast by Antonio,\textsuperscript{20} and of course we have the often quoted words of Bosola:

\begin{quote}
We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded
Which way please them--
\end{quote}

(V.iv.54-55)

In addition, cosmic indifference to the sufferings of man seems explicit in Bosola's "Look you, the stars still shine:" (IV.i.99), which Clifford Leech calls "... the completest assertion in Jacobean drama of man's impotence, of the remoteness, the impersonality of the cosmic powers."\textsuperscript{21} We have further instances of society's indifference to man, and on the individual level, man's indifference to his fellow man. The Duchess' progress through the play consists of the development of a full awareness of this indifference and
hostility. Gradually, all the illusions of protection and safety are taken from her: the prerogatives and perhaps assumed invulnerability of her position as Duchess, the safeguards of law and religion, the protection of a husband, the affection of her brothers: "My laurel is all withered." (III.v.93). When she dies, only her servant remains by her side. She is, in effect, alone with only an affirmation of her identity to tenaciously cling to: in spite of everything, "I am Duchess of Malfi still." (IV.ii.142). Muriel Bradbrook sees IV.ii in this way:

The scene is not laid in a definite place: it is, as it were, in a different dimension; there is a curious stillness and hush about the scene, a static quality and a sense of timelessness.22

In this scene the Duchess is able to see the truth about life and about her situation, coming finally to recognize and accept the omnipresence of evil, ergo life as compounded of violence and cruelty:

Persuade a wretch that's broke upon the wheel
To have all his bones new set; entreat him live
To be executed again:—who must despatch me?
I account this world a tedious theatre,
For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will.
.
Go howl them this: and say I long to bleed:
It is some mercy, when men kill with speed.

(IV.ii.81-85; 109-110)

The Duchess, Bradbrook feels, concentrates the meaning of the whole play into herself, and can thus express the total situation as though she were standing outside the action, observ-
ing it with disdain, with "... the detachment of a feeling which has passed beyond hope or despair. ..."

The fourth and all important thematic line which I discern in The Duchess of Malfi is that of man as animal. It is the end-result of the thematic lines discussed above. After the restraints are broken, man's true nature is revealed. It is the central purpose of a Theatre of Cruelty:

... the spectator is confronted with the madness of the human condition, is enabled to see his situation in all its grimness and despair, and thus, in stripping him of illusions or vaguely felt fears and anxieties, enables him to face it consciously, rather than feel it vaguely below the surface of euphemisms and optimistic illusions.  

I earlier used a quotation from Shakespeare as an analogy which gives in brief the implications of a world without order and harmony as depicted in The Duchess of Malfi. A more recent analogy now seems relevant to the concept of man as animal. Acts IV and V of Webster's play are effectively summed up by a patient at the asylum of Charenton in Weiss' Marat/Sade:

A mad animal
Man's a mad animal
I'm a thousand years old and in my time
I've helped commit a million murders
The earth is spread
The earth is spread thick
with squashed human guts
We few survivors
We few survivors
walk over a quaking bog of corpses
always under our feet
every step we take
rotted bones ashes matted hair
under our feet
broken teeth skulls split open
A mad animal
I'm a mad animal

In The Duchess of Malfi man as animal is a motif in the imagery as constant as that of the world gone mad pattern which runs throughout the play. In fact, the two concepts--madness and man as animal--join visually and poetically in the final act when Ferdinand imagines himself to be a wolf. Here we have an explicitly visual and deliberately grotesque confirmation of the theme:

One met the duke, 'bout midnight in a lane
Behind Saint Mark's church, with the leg of a man
Upon his shoulder; and he howl'd fearfully;
Said he was a wolf, only the difference
Was, a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside,
His on the inside; . . . .

(V.ii.13-18)

This marks the culmination and concretization of a pattern of imagery used throughout the play in which the characters are linked with animals. For example:

. . . could I be one of their flattering panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off: . . . .

(Bos. I.i.52-54)

I would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, than kiss one of you fasting.

(Bos. II.i.38-40)

Mark Prince Ferdinand:
A very salamander lives in's eye,
To mock the eager violence of fire.

(Pes. III.iii.48-50)
That cardinal . . . ; he lifts up's nose, like a foul porpoise before a storm—
(Sil. III.iii.51-53)

Within the same pattern, the Duchess is linked with trapped and captive animals:

Alas, your shears do come untimely now To clip the bird's wings that's already flown! (Duch. III.ii.84-85)

I would have you tell me Whether is that note worse that frights the silly birds Out of the corn, or that which doth allure them To the nets? you have hearken'd to the last too much. (Bos. III.v.101-104)

Bos. Your brothers mean you safety, and pity. Duch. Pity! With such a pity men preserve alive Pheasants and quails, when they are not fat enough To be eaten. (III.v.109-112)

If we consider the total effect of the thematic lines present in The Duchess of Malfi, we observe that despite the differentiation which can be made, Webster was working towards a single cumulative effect: the evil of the world, the cruelty of life, the animality of man. The point of view in the play is admittedly limited, a pre-determined and, as Alvin Kernan notes, a philosophically biased point of view. Webster, Kernan observes, makes a shambles of accepted ideals of reason, order, love and control. The play is a view of what man is. It is important to note that, for the purpose of this view, how man became this way--i.e., how the Ferdinands and Bosolas and Cardinals of society were molded and formed into their ultimate
animal state—is essentially irrelevant. Webster's concern is with the results rather than the causes, with the here and now of his dramatic world, and a background for his characters, or even a careful consistency of motivation and action in the course of the play becomes secondary to the presentation of what Ornstein designates as the dramatization of the mysterious workings of the irrational will. Thus to a critic like William Archer, who feels Webster shows "singular inexpertness" in telling his story well, our retort can only be that plot was secondary to theme in the writing of The Duchess of Malfi. Webster found his basic plot line elsewhere, but he adapted and altered it to illustrate a predetermined thesis. As Travis Bogard notes, "... the complete reversal of Painter's and Belleforest's disapproval of the Duchess of Malfi is clearly an alteration to fit an individual conception of the basic materials." Webster seems interested in making men aware of their innate, albeit submerged, irrational and anarchic tendencies. Bronson Feldman makes an interesting point in this connection when he suggests of Webster's two major plays as well as of Othello, The Maid's Tragedy and The Broken Heart:

Painting the hot-blooded personages of these plays in Mediterranean racial colors enabled the dramatists to utter more freely the emotions of the English men and women they were concerned with in actuality.

As Theatre of Cruelty, the play in consequence can become, in Artaud's words,
... beneficial, for impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; ... and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it.32

Or, in much simpler terms, The Duchess of Malfi qualifies as "... an exorcism to make our demons FLOW."33 an idea not unrelated to Leech's assertion of "... the extension of grasp that the play makes available to us."34

It is only if we equate the theatre with entertainment which is intended to amuse and divert but not to arouse or stimulate us—or, if it does upset us, it will certainly see to it that we are reassured before we leave the auditorium—that we have difficulty accepting the thematic implications of a work like The Duchess of Malfi. Thus a nineteenth century critic such as Sir William Watson can say of the Jacobeans in general and Webster in particular:

These men had no sober vision of things. Theirs is a world that reels in a 'disastrous twilight' of lust and blood. We rise from Shakespeare enlarged and illumined. Webster is felt as a contracting and blurring influence. ... Virtue in this disordered world is merely wasted, honour bears not issue, nobleness dies unto itself.35

As F.L. Lucas points out, Watson's observations are perfectly correct, but the intention of the remark is approbation for Webster's lack of reassurance that lust and blood are rare exceptions rather than constant presences. If Webster's play is read in the light of theory about the functions of a
Theatre of Cruelty, Watson's criticisms cease to have a derogatory effect.

The mind which has come by bitter experience to loath the 'painted comforts' that hide the cruelty of the world is the readier in its reaction to dwell almost lovingly on the grim realities behind. They at least are true, and better than pretence.36

One final point should be made. There is, to be sure, token reassurance of the return of order and harmony given at the end of the play. It is a brief scene of some fifteen lines in which Delio enters with Antonio's son and suggests:

Let us make noble use
Of this great ruin; and join all our force
To establish this young, hopeful gentleman
In's mother's right.

(V.v.110-113)

However, in view of all that has taken place, in view of the cruelty and chaos of the preceding five acts--especially the last two, which are still strongest in our minds, the effectiveness of this final tacit reassurance is doubtful. To all effects and purposes, the play ends, and its meaning is finally summed up, in Bosola's dying speech which immediately precedes the entrance of Delio:

O this gloomy world!
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!
Let worthy minds ne'er stagger in distrust
To suffer death, or shame for what is just--
Mine is another voyage.

(V.v.100-105)
The function of poetic imagery in a scheme which attempts to interpret *The Duchess of Malfi* in the light of a twentieth century theory of theatre needs some further and separate consideration. As was shown in the preceding chapter, Webster's poetic images work closely with his visual images in the realization of a thematic point of view analogous to the desired content of Artaud's dramas of cruelty. Artaud himself would be little interested in a concern for the role of the verbal image; since in effect the verbal images perform a duplicating function, repeating in words ideas and attitudes which are present visually, his approach to the play would be to do without most of the dialogue and concentrate on the theatrical realization of the themes visually. Wellwarth explains it in this way:

> Everything that has ever been done in the theater since ancient Greece has been predicated on the assumption that the function of the theater is communication through speech. But speech—communication of rational thoughts—is the very thing that does not and cannot distinguish the theater from anything else—which makes it, in short, merely a branch of literature. If rational communication through speech is really the ultimate goal of the theater, then, according to Artaud, there is no point at all in going to the enormous trouble and expense of producing a play: it is obviously enough simply to read it. One can obtain information from the written word just as easily as from the spoken. Theater, Artaud decreed, must be theatrical, and speech is not theatrical, but literary. Therefore we must concentrate exclusively on those elements of the theater peculiar to it alone.

However, there is a way out of this dictum which we must take if we are going to do justice to Webster without doing an
injustice to Artaud. That is the designation of speech as "the communication of rational thoughts." That does not seem to me to be the primary function of the language of The Duchess of Malfi, at least the language which avails itself of imagery. Another point made by Wellwarth is useful here in establishing the context for this approach:

Speech might still be used in the theater, but not for the communication of ideas and not in such a way as to make it an end in itself. Words can be used on the stage as sound per se—as intonations. As such, their purpose would no longer be to communicate thought, but to bring about an emotional effect.

The use of words and images to elicit an "emotional effect" seems to be of distinct relevance to the work under consideration. Without denying that much of Webster's dialogue is directly communicative and functions on a purely narrative level, the fact remains that whenever a poetic image is brought in, its orientation is usually not to the intellect but primarily to the senses. If we look at the poetic content of The Duchess of Malfi in terms of its sensory orientation, and its anarchic and irrational images, it should be seen that language becomes yet another of the many devices used by Webster in the overall presentation—an indispensible part of the Total Theatre approach to the play. As Moody Prior observes "... the remarkable feature of Webster as a writer of dramatic verse is his effective use of the instruments of poetry to illuminate and develop his difficult materials."39

We must also keep in mind that in Webster's time, without the
modern technical resources on which Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty is so dependent, the main way in which mood and atmosphere could be created on stage was through full use of the linguistic medium. Poetry was an indispensible part of Webster's Theatre of Cruelty.

Many of the images in The Duchess of Malfi seem intentionally revolting—just as much so as the visual images. They aid and abet the attack on the emotions and nerves of an audience. Webster's word pictures play on sight, sound, taste, touch: as such they are not only immediately evocative but intensely physical: "Often his visual symbols suggest a fearful immediacy, an icy touch, a suffocating embrace, a physical contact with the horrible."⁴⁰ Indeed, this is the quality of many of the images presented in the preceding chapter, and in their context there, they can be seen as inseparable from any full discussion of the play's themes. A few more examples should suffice at this point:

You do tremble:
Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh
To fear, more than to love me: . . .
(Duch. I.i.450-452)

There was a lady in France, that having had the smallpox, flayed the skin off her face to make it more level; and whereas before she looked like a nutmeg-grater, after she resembled an abortive hedgehog.
(Bos. II.i.26-29)

Bos. Will not your grace pare them?
Duch. No, they taste of musk, methinks; indeed they do:--
Bos. I know not: yet I wish your grace had par'd 'em:--
Duch. Why?
Bos. I forgot to tell you the knave gard'ner
(Only to raise his profit by them the sooner)
Did ripen them in horse-dung.
(II.i.135-140)
. . . your kiss is colder
Than that I have seen an holy anchorite
Give to a dead man's skull.  (Duch. III.v.88-90)

If they would bind me to that lifeless trunk
And let me freeze to death.  (Duch. IV.i.68)

Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory of
green mummy:—what's this flesh? a little cruded
milk, fantastical puff-paste; our bodies are weaker than
those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in; more con-
temptible, since ours is to preserve earth-worms.
(Bos. IV.ii.124-128)

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?
(Duch. IV.ii.216-218)

One could go on, but the examples given constitute a represen-
tative sampling of the play's imagery. Verbal and visual
cruelty work together throughout. L.G. Salingar's response
is indicative:

. . . the agonies of the torture-chamber--battering, chok-
ing, flaying, beheading; toothache, insomnia, fever; the
stinging of bees; pressing to death with weights. . . .
every sensation is inflamed, every emotion becomes an
orgy . . . . Storming, defying, bewailing, spartanizing;
the set teeth, the bold front and the intolerable pang:
these are almost the whole of Webster's tragical repertory. 41

When spoken language is used in the theatre, Artaud
suggests, it must be used in a special, non-communicative way:

True poetry is, willy nilly, metaphysical and it is just
its metaphysical bearing, I should say, the intensity of
its metaphysical effect, that comprises its essential
worth.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
To make metaphysics out of a spoken language is to make the language express what it does not ordinarily express: to make use of it in a new, exceptional, and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing physical shock.42

There is thus a fundamental anarchy at the root of all true poetry; an anarchy felt in the new relationships which are established between objects, between forms and significations. In Webster's play, the utilization of unexpected relationships between objects is a primary basis of the imagery. The Duchess speaks of having her throat cut with diamonds, or being shot to death with pearls; compares her husband's kiss to that of an anchorite kissing a dead man's skull. Further:

murder shrieks out:
The element of water moistens the earth,
But blood flies upward, and bedews the heavens.
(Bos. IV.ii.261-263)

We seem to sweat in ice, and freeze in fire.
(Bos. IV.ii.338)

You shall see me wind my tongue about his heart,
Like a skein of silk.
(Julia. V.ii.222-223)

One cannot do justice to most of Webster's images if one attempts to "explain" them; to express their effect in rational, analytical terms. The images are comprehended best on an emotional level, and thus work well in a form of theatre which is primarily aimed at affecting the emotions. There is, to be sure, minimal intellectual content in The Duchess of Malfi, in the sense of discussions within the play of concepts
of good and evil, or any of the other thematic concepts which are revealed in the visual and verbal images. But the poetic imagery does have a cumulating emotional effect; Webster is fond of iterative images, and when one attempts to categorize the images, as Moody Prior does to some degree in *The Language of Tragedy*, the frequency of images dealing in one way or another with blood, death, demons, sickness and disease, predatory animals, warfare, decay and sex becomes apparent. Prior notes that storm and tempest imagery—so fundamental to the idea of anarchy and chaos in the play's thematic pattern—appears frequently:

The suggestions of violence in the storm images, supplemented by references to thunder, earthquakes, and the like, are also sustained by figures derived from battles and implements of warfare.

The best example has previously been discussed in relation to theme:

Card. Why do you make yourself So wild a tempest? Ferd. Would I could be one, That I might toss her palace 'bout her ears, Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads, And lay her general territory as waste As she hath done her honours. (II.v.16-21)

Prior also notes:

But this is not merely an evil and violent world; it is corrupt and gross and unhealthy. This impression grows from the persistent use of such words as foul, dark, rank, rotten, pestilent . . . and from multiplication of images bearing on disease, drugs, and decay.
Prior's discussion is also useful in noting how characters are associated with certain types of images, which will be an important consideration in the next chapter. The primary purpose of this brief digression between considerations of theme and character has been to emphasize the fact that poetic imagery is an essential unifying element in *The Duchess of Malfi*, and that the fundamentally anarchic and emotional qualities of this imagery makes mandatory its inclusion in considering the relevance of a Theatre of Cruelty to Webster's play. Verbal cruelty supports and deepens the effectiveness of the visual cruelty in *The Duchess of Malfi*. 
CHAPTER IV
CHARACTERS AS FORCES IN THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

The following discussion of characterization in The Duchess of Malfi is intentionally limited in approach. I am primarily concerned with suggesting an approach to character which seems relevant to the investigation of the total dramatic work as Theatre of Cruelty. Moreover, some of the following points will be unavoidably repetitive, in that I feel characterization constitutes a third approach to theme, one which depends for full understanding on visual and verbal imagery, but which, at least for purposes of this discussion, will be treated separately.

At an earlier point in this paper, I suggested that the thematic core of the play was centralized and best expressed visually in the death scene of the Duchess. If we could stop the action, and freeze the stage picture at the point in IV.ii at which the Duchess, kneeling, is strangled by the two Executioners, probably one on each side of her, each holding an end of the cord that is looped about her neck, with the coffin close by and Bosola looking on dispassionately, we would have a character image which represents the meaning and also the results of the thematic concerns suggested in the last chapter: the breakdown of order and harmony; the world gone mad; the helplessness of the rational individual against irrational forces; man as animal. The death image also suggests
a basic overall conception of character which has evolved out of these separate thematic lines. It is thus tempting to see the Duchess costumed in white and the Executioners and Bosola in black, but perhaps this would be a little too blatantly symbolic. But at its core, the play can be seen as concerned with a contrast between Good and Evil, more specifically between the dominating forces of Evil and the dominated forces of Good; an Evil which overpowers and destroys Good. It is on this rather deceptively simple antithesis that I feel Webster has developed his characters. Consequently, the characters seen as symbols can provide another approach to theme.

Suggesting a Good-Evil contrast in the characterization of *The Duchess of Malfi* leaves the way open for several levels of interpretation: religious, in that the characters could profitably be regarded in terms of the Good and Evil contrasts inherent in the traditional English morality play;\(^1\) politically, in that the play could be seen as a theatricalization of the (albeit misunderstood) doctrines of Machiavelli; psychological, in that the play could be read as a realization on the stage of the irrational and anarchic tendencies of man. In relation to a Theatre of Cruelty, the latter approach is of course most applicable, but in the following discussion of character, the other possibilities need not be totally excluded. In speaking of a contrast between Good and Evil, I am merely choosing to use the two most basic referents avail-
able. As was suggested earlier, the Good/Evil dichotomy is of great use theatrically; since it simplifies the meaning of the play sufficiently to make it readily comprehensible to all; the degree of complexity added to the play will depend on individual perceptiveness and interpretation.

Alexander Allison suggests the ethical design in the play is one of polar contrast between the Duchess and her antagonists. The Evil represented by her antagonists gradually fills in the entire world: "The duchess's tragedy informs us that there is a power abroad which can . . . at least for a time, drive value from the earth. . . . . And, all the while, the action is accompanied by a choric descant upon the predominance of evil in the world. . . ." The idea of Good being driven from the earth, as Allison expresses it, leads me to suggest we might profitably view Webster's characters as forces. In The Cankered Muse, Alvin Kernan sees Ferdinand and the Cardinal in these terms; as forces representative of unrestrained anarchic individualism. Artaud used symbols as his operative term:

The theater restores us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols: and behold! before our eyes is fought a battle of symbols, one charging against another in an impossible mêlée. . . .

This view is perhaps a little too dramatically stated for our purposes; in The Duchess of Malfi the forces or symbols do not really charge against each other--the process is rather
one of the slow but steady advance of the forces of unrestrained impulse, savagery, hatred and anarchy as manifested in varying degrees in the characters of Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosola against the rather helpless and passive "forces" of order, reason and normal life represented by the Duchess. If the conflict can in any way be construed as a battle, it is an extremely one-sided one; necessarily so for Webster's purposes. The only real aides to the Duchess' cause are the rather ineffectual Antonio and the faithful but dispensable Cariola, while the opposition is able to draw unto itself assistance from all quarters—the Church, the law, and as is surely intimated in the cross-section of society represented by the madmen, most of mankind; mankind which, as further symbolized and concentrated into the character of Bosola, is always ready to do anything for money or the promise of social preferment.

Before looking in some detail at the two opposing or contrasted forces present in *The Duchess of Malfi* it is necessary to offer some qualification to this division of characters into what may seem at first to be two completely separate groupings—one Evil, the other Good. This of course is not the case; almost all the characters are neither completely Good nor Evil, but have varying and constantly shifting mixtures of both qualities. In a predominantly Evil world, not even a character as essentially Good as the Duchess is free from corruption, nor is a character as essentially representative of
the forces of Evil as is Duke Ferdinand entirely without our sympathy or his moments of sanity in the midst of his general insanity. It is this ambiguity and constant shifting of perspective which makes Webster's characters both so interesting (and real) as people and so difficult to comprehend. It is in this area of ambiguity in characterization that most critical study on The Duchess of Malfi has concentrated, and several conflicting points of view are available to us on the discerned good and bad qualities of the Duchess, Bosola, Ferdinand and Antonio. These will be dealt with in turn below. At this point it seems wise to suggest that we also keep the broader outlines continually in mind. Black and white character contrasts may seem too simple and melodramatic, but while the various shadings Webster has given his characters add a desirable complexity and, I think, an intentional ambiguity to the play, his basic starting point should be seen as a fairly clear opposition between black and white types. From a distance, this dark and light dichotomy is clear and distinct; only when we close in on the play and begin to examine the finer points of character do we see that all the major characters emerge as variegated mixtures. In the theatre, however, Webster keeps his play moving so quickly, and in his visual and verbal images seems to make it so apparent that his characters are in essence opposed and contrasted forces, that the finer points of behaviour which we can discern in the study would be of less concern to us in the immediacy of
the theatre.

The Duchess lives surrounded by evil and corruption. This is made clear in the all important first few minutes of the play, as all the main characters make their first appearances. Webster characterizes quickly, and it is of some note that our first impressions of the characters as they are introduced establishes their type definitively for the entire play. Travis Bogard suggests of Webster's method: "Shakespearian tragedy is individual, with a suggested generality of application; Websterian tragedy is broadly social, with individuals serving as normative examples of Webster's conception of life." The Evil in The Duchess of Malfi is human evil, manifested in character, and not in some remote, abstract and unseen cosmic force. Let us see how carefully Webster establishes this. In his first speech, Antonio alludes to the death and disease which he sees as the inevitable concomitants of a corrupt court. Now Bosola enters, and complains to the Cardinal of being neglected—he expects payment and preferment for services rendered. The Cardinal, cold and enigmatic, repulses him, and Bosola observes:

I will thrive some way: blackbirds fatten best in hard weather; why not I, in these dog-days?  
(I.i.37-39)

Our first impressions of the two characters prove to be the right ones: the Cardinal remains cold, sinister and enigmatic throughout the play, while Bosola's constant complaint is
that he is neglected, with the accompanying note of willingness to do any sort of unpleasant task if he can share in the spoils. In the speech cited above, he has compared himself to a blackbird—the implications of feeding on carrion are probably meant to be there—and a few lines later he has become, in his own terminology, a blood-sucking horse-leech, attaching himself to Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who are "... rich, and o'erladen/with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them..." (I.i.50-52). The two brothers seem to have everything Bosola doesn't have—wealth, power, position and prestige, but at the same time they are linked in imagery with rottenness, corruption, putrefying flesh; crows, pies and caterpillars are also carrion feeders, as are horse-leeches. We are only a few minutes into the play and already there is an unpleasant taste in our mouths. Webster is carefully building an initial response to character based on associative animal imagery carrying implications of disease and decay. The idea is put into another context with Bosola's first exit; his parting line likens the court to a hospital, the courtiers to patients. Again, death and disease seem inextricably joined with the Duchess of Malfi's court.

The next scenic unit introduces us to Ferdinand. It is worth noting that, although in this first scene it is handled lightly, there is a strong sexual under-current to his jesting interchanges with Castruchio. What is perhaps more
important to our first view of him is that his fiery, quick and unpredictable temperament is displayed. Without warning, he suddenly turns on Silvio, Roderigo and Grisolan, who, taking their cue from him, have joined in on the baiting of the gullible Castruchio:

Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers should be my touch-wood, take fire, when I give fire; that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty—

(I.i.122-235)

The sudden unexpectedness with which he quashes his attendants is an early hint as to his unpredictability and his inability to keep himself under control. Webster thus introduces the character in such a way that our early suspicions about him prove to be as accurate as those we have felt about the Cardinal and Bosola. Further confirmation of our suspicions follows immediately in the exchange between Antonio and Delio; the Cardinal, we learn, uses religion to serve his own ends, just as Ferdinand makes a corresponding use of the law. The Cardinal

Will play his five thousand crowns at tennis, dance, Court ladies, and . . . hath fought single combats.

(I.i.154-155)

He is a man of the world, hardly of the Church. Ferdinand has "a most perverse, and turbulent nature: . . .":(I.i.169), an observation which gives us a verbal affirmation of what we have in fact just seen.
The introductory movement of the play concludes with Antonio's description of the Duchess. It seems significant that she is the last major character to be described to us. Webster has carefully delineated the world in which she lives, and it is hardly a pleasant one. In the midst of surrounding contamination is "the right noble duchess--":

Her days are practis'd in such noble virtue
That sure her nights--nay more, her very sleeps--
Are more in heaven than other ladies' shrifts.
Let all sweet ladies break their flatt'ring glasses,
And dress themselves in her.  
(I.i.201-204)

Surely Webster's initial characterization of the Duchess is to be regarded as every bit as indicative of what attitude the audience is to take towards her as has been his initial swift characterizations of Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosola. The effect of The Duchess of Malfi rests, I feel, largely on the very clear-cut attitudes to character which Webster elicits in this first few minutes of the play; the right-noble Duchess, the perverse and turbulent Ferdinand, the enigmatic Cardinal, "able to possess the greatest devil," (I.i.46) and the slighted malcontent Bosola, completely without illusions as to the truths of life:

Ferd. There's gold.   Bos. So:
What follows? Never rain'd such show'rs as these
Without thunderbolts in the tail of them;
Whose throat must I cut?  
(I.i.247-249)
I have dwelt at some length on the opening moments of the play because they seem essential in establishing audience attitude. Further, if we will accept Webster's initial descriptions of his characters, many of the problems related to motivations and the seeming ambivalence of Webster's attitude to his characters are somewhat minimized. Let us now look in turn at the two opposed forces of the play as represented by characters.

As Alexander Allison notes, the Duchess is a noble woman whom Webster carefully distinguished from the sum of malice and deceit arrayed against her. "In her death scene she becomes a lone embodiment of value: a single bright spot, as Webster's imagery would have it, in the surrounding dark." Throughout the play she denotes light, health, normal appetites and instincts; reason and order. But, as Richard Sewall notes, "... her little light was soon extinguished." This to me is the whole point of the play. Harold Jenkins suggests that The Duchess of Malfi is "... a revenge play without a crime."; he sees the Duchess as completely innocent, and feels it is erroneous to regard her in any context of guilt, including her personal consciousness of guilt, for her secret remarriage to a person of lower rank. The explications of the Duchess' character by Stoll and Leech both concentrate to a large degree on the assignment of guilt and consciousness of guilt to the Duchess. They base their discussions on the assumption that the Duchess has committed a definite crime by marrying Antonio. This mode of approach strikes me primarily as an attempt to
find some justification, no matter how slight, for the savagery of the punishment meted out by her brothers. If this cannot be done, the Duchess' punishment becomes horrifying in its anarchic implications; meaningless destruction with no rationally justifiable cause. And, I think, that is exactly what Webster wanted to show happening. What both Stoll and Leech seem to overlook is that the Duchess does not seem to regard her marriage as a crime, but regrets rather the compromising position it forces her into; regrets that the world she lives in forces her to resort to subterfuge and duplicity in order to live a normal, healthy life:

O misery! methinks unjust actions
Should wear these masks and curtains, and not we:--

(III.ii.158-159)

The Duchess maintains her personal integrity to the end, never admitting to any crime because she has not committed one. She welcomes death not as just punishment for her sins, but as a release from a world of Evil in which she no longer wishes to live. It has become a "tedious theatre" (IV.i.84). Death does not frighten her; she is willing to die "any way, for heaven sake,/So I were out of your whispering." (IV.i.222-223), and her final words reveal a full awareness of the totality of violence and cruelty in the world:

Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,
They then may feed in quiet.

(IV.ii.236-237)
P.F. Vernon perceives a definite moral flaw in the Duchess and Antonio; because of their duplicity they become as culpable as their persecutors. Their methods "... except in their honest end ... are indistinguishable from the cunning schemes of the court Machiavellians." Should we not add, however, that the duplicity is unwillingly undertaken, but absolutely necessary for survival? It seems impossible to remain completely innocent and untainted in a world which thrives on subterfuge and deception. In Webster's world, as in our own, the survival instinct is innate. In the delineation of what one must do in order to survive, Webster and Bertolt Brecht seem to have an analogous philosophy: The Duchess is a distant relative of Shen Te in The Good Woman of Setzuan who at the close of Brecht's play speaks to the three hopelessly ineffectual Gods as follows:

Your former injunction to be good and yet to live
Tore me like lightning in halves.
I don't know how it happened.
To be good to others and to myself--
I couldn't do both at the same time.

For who could long refuse to be bad when he who eats no meat must die?

A load of good intentions weighed me down to the ground.
Yet when I was unjust I walked mightily about and ate good meat!
Something must be wrong with your world.
Why is malice well rewarded? Why do punishments await the good?

Between Webster's play and Brecht's, mankind seems to have remained much the same. From two completely different plays
we can extract a comparable justification of wrong behaviour: it may not be moral or desirable, but it is practical. Further, it is inevitable in a morally chaotic world which, as Ferdinand notes, is "... but a dog-kennel:" (V.v.67).

Turning to the Evil forces in the play, we find that Brecht can also supply us with a relevant summation of an attitude to life which is distinctly that of Webster's Bosola:

For what keeps a man alive?
He keeps alive by every hour
Torturing, stripping, attacking, throttling, and devouring his fellow man.
A man just keeps alive by completely
Being able to forget that he's a human being too.\(^12\)

Bosola is completely without illusions as to the meanness of life, and is perfectly willing to undertake any job, be it spy, hired assassin, torturer or executioner, so long as there is something in it for him. His constant complaint is of being ill-used, unappreciated, insufficiently rewarded by those he has served well. As noted, this is established during his first appearance in the play, and becomes a keynote of his character. Antonio does notice that:

'Tis great pity
He should be thus neglected--I have heard
He's very valiant: this foul melancholy
Will poison all his goodness. . . .

(I.i.74-77)

He can thus reasonably be seen as "... an essentially moral man who has yielded to the pressures of corruption. ..."\(^13\)
but except for rare moments of distaste for what he feels the world has forced him to become, such as

O, that to avoid ingratitude
For the good deed you have done me, I must do
All the ill man can invent!

(I.i.273-275)

he seems able to ignore the reality of his actions; he has been hired to do a job, and feelings of humanity and compunction are best suppressed. Admittedly, he is unnerved by the death of the Duchess, by the show of courage she displays in the face of torture and suffering. However, I find it impossible to agree with Irving Ribner's contention that her death precipitates Bosola's reformation:

When Bosola recognizes the value of the Duchess's "integrity of life," it is no longer possible for him to live by the code which had linked him to the Arragonian brothers. While good is possible, he must seek for values in life, and thus he comes to stand for justice and the restoration of order. . . . Her 'fair soul,' bright and unchanging like the shining stars, leads him out of the darkness of a world without value to an affirmation of the dignity of life for which she had stood and for which he now comes to stand.14

Is it really possible to see Bosola as affirming the dignity of life in the remainder of the play following the Duchess' death? Better perhaps to say he affirms the reality of life. Bosola in Act V is really no different from the Bosola of Acts I through IV. He is as much concerned with personal revenge for the ingratitude of Ferdinand for his services as he is with revenge against him for what he had
commissioned Bosola to do to the Duchess. In fact, one suspects that the latter revenge motive is really only a justifying pretence for the former. The effect of the play as a manifestation of cruelty and anarchy would be weakened if Bosola in Act V suddenly became penitent and moral. In actual fact, his actions tend to deny his stated intentions, thus denying also the validity of Ribner's interpretation of the final act. Bosola's way of doing "good," as Ribner would name it, ironically and indicatively involves the same techniques, the same deceptiveness and cunning that had been necessary in carrying out the job assigned him by Ferdinand at the beginning of the play. As Clifford Leech observes:

In this last act we have seen him drawn over into sympathy with Antonio and his dead wife, yet slaying an innocent servant without compunction, mistakenly killing Antonio, complaining always of being neglected. As an instrument of justice he is pitifully imperfect, while he had shown address as tormentor and executioner.15

Throughout Act V, Bosola continues as before, and Webster's point here may be that in a totally chaotic world the ordered distinctions between the Good and Evil are no longer operative; irrational and anarchic forces have taken over completely. The visual image of the death of the Duchess implies the obliteration of the concept of Good, with its connotations of order, reason, trust and happiness, from the world. Act V turns the implication into visual fact; man is no longer a rational creature, but merely animal. It is a dog eat dog
world, and when passion takes over from reason, moral concerns become somewhat extraneous and irrelevant. Thus Ornstein asks:

How can revenge action be regarded as virtuous in an evil world when that action itself must be devious, politic, or tainted with evil?\(^{16}\)

In relation to the approach to characterization in _The Duchess of Malfi_ taken in this discussion, Alvin Kernan's observations of Bosola are by far the most useful, i.e.:

... his psychotic hatred of the flesh which is mixed with fascination, his sick concentration on disease and the bodily processes, and his sadistic joy in torturing others.\(^ {17}\)

Bosola's confusion following the death of the Duchess might profitably be regarded as a confusion resulting from his inability to drag her down to his level, his inability to make her see the filthiness of the world through his eyes. The triumph of the Duchess is that she refuses to be contaminated by Bosola or her brothers. Thus when Bosola says "Now, by my life, I pity you." (IV.i.88), the pity need not be interpreted as pity for her suffering, but rather for her intrepid faith and goodness. Throughout the prison scene he constantly mocks his captive; there surely must be perversely cynical intended in his various interjections: "O fie! despair? remember/You are a Christian." (IV.i.74); "O fie! ... O fearful! ... Fie lady! ... 0, uncharitable!" (IV.i.96 through 110). Bosola tires of the game because he sees he is not going to win. Thus he asks Ferdinand to stop the torment, asks never
to have to see her again. However, it is difficult to admit regret and genuine repentance into his character at this point. He is only temporarily amazed by the way in which the Duchess welcomes death. His words immediately after she is strangled are very telling in their cold and business-like import:

Where's the waiting woman?
Fetch her: some other strangle the children.

(IV.ii.237-238)

And, a few lines later, when Cariola tries to avoid dying:

Delays:--throttle her.

Finally, in answer to Ferdinand: "Is she dead?"

She is what
You'd have her: . . .

(IV.ii.256)

The "repentance" of Bosola only occurs after Ferdinand attempts to deny responsibility for what Bosola has done, and because Ferdinand refuses to reward him. If Ferdinand is not going to fulfill his part of the bargain, Bosola naturally wishes he had known in advance. Like any hired killer, he expects to be paid.

Bosola is the rational and conscious executor of orders which have originated in the irrational, deranged mind of Ferdinand. Thus Bosola's actions are in a very true sense the physical and visual realization of the subconscious and sup-
pressed—hence imperfectly understood—desires and fantasies of Ferdinand. Within Ferdinand is the latent violence and cruelty which the Theatre of Cruelty would have us realize is latent in us all. His actions can be seen as representing the workings of the instinctual and the irrational. Consequently, there is a problem in comprehending him. There is more to understanding Ferdinand's actions than simply discerning in him a long suppressed incestuous passion for his sister which provokes his vengeance against her disobedience. Initially, we realize that Ferdinand's actions result from a perverted love which manifests itself as hatred and cruelty. We note that he constantly thinks of his sister in sexual terms, as in

> And women like that part which, like the lamprey, 
> Hath ne'er a bone in't.

\[\text{Duch.} \quad \text{Fie sir!} \]
\[\text{Ferd:} \quad \text{Nay,} \]
\[\text{I mean the tongue: variety of courtship;}--\]
\[\text{What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale} \]
\[\text{Make a woman believe? Farewell, lusty widow.} \]
\[\text{(I.i.336-340)} \]

and

> Methinks I see her laughing--
> Excellent hyena!—talk to me somewhat, quickly,
> Or my imagination will carry me
> To see her, in the shameful act of sin.
> \[\text{(II.v.38-41)} \]

However, what seems important for us to realize is that his revenge action is only a rationalized pretext; once he loses control and gives way to his latent emotions, the predetermined
motive and its end result is lost sight of completely, and Ferdinand becomes an uncontrollable force, finally degenerating into complete animal irrationality. It is in our observance of this irrational force in action, in our uneasy mixed reactions of fascination and revulsion, and in our growing realization that the situation is wildly out of control that the play's effectiveness rests. Ferdinand

... takes the initiative and invents every refinement of cruelty in the torture of his sister. ... while Webster repeatedly stresses the pain and the fury which lie behind Ferdinand's outbursts, he consistently declines to interpret them, and it is at least arguable that the peculiar effect of terror and suffering which he sought to convey demanded that this issue should remain a mystery: in fact the Duchess's ordeal becomes the more horrifying because of the very lack of an explicit motive on the part of her tormentors.18

Thus we are puzzled by Ferdinand because we cannot fully encompass him with our intellects. But, once we realize that he is out of control, a destructive force which is no longer guided by principles of reason or sanity, we can comprehend him sufficiently to sympathize with him, and, however reluctantly, see something of ourselves in him. In the Theatre of Cruelty, rational comprehension--full understanding of a character's motives and actions--is not essential, but empathy is. As Wellwarth observes, much of an audience's expressed distaste of avant-garde drama comes as

... an inevitable result of the confusion created in the human mind by its acquired fear of instinct and its ingrained habit of analyzing action. The spectator is confused because he shies away from overt displays of
his own instinctual self and because he tries to analyze, i.e., understand, instead of responding and participating emotionally.19

Of the Cardinal, little need be added to what was said earlier. He remains cold, remote and enigmatic, yet he is part of the same uncontrollable force symbolized by Ferdinand. The force is visually presented in the actions of Ferdinand and Bosola, but we cannot leave the Cardinal in the background. When he confesses to Julia:

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

(V.ii.267-268)

we should not be too surprised. A true Machiavellian figure, he is able to keep himself under control, to hide his true feelings from the world much more than his brother is, and this is essentially the only real difference between them:

Yes—I can be angry
Without this rupture: there is not in nature
A thing that makes man so deform'd, so beastly,
As doth intemperate anger:--

(II.v.55-58)

Enough has perhaps been indicated to allow the interpretation of Webster's characters as opposing forces, with the Duchess as the main representative of a positive force which is extinguished by the superiority--in rank, strength and number--of the forces of Evil represented in its various facets by Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosola. In his
delineation of character, Webster has thus offered another means of total comprehension. The thematic implications of The Duchess of Malfi, as discussed in an earlier chapter in terms of realization in visual and verbal images, are further borne out in the polar delineation of character.
CHAPTER V

"... A FASHIONABLE MIXTURE OF ALL THE BEST THEATRICAL INGREDIENTS AROUND. . . ."

Thus far in this discussion I have attempted to show how in form, theme, characterization and visual and verbal imagery, The Duchess of Malfi can be related to what has been named the Theatre of Cruelty. At the same time, I have tried to suggest that although Artaud was the formulator of the concept of Theatre of Cruelty, in actual practise such a theatre or form of drama existed long before he wrote The Theater and its Double. In seeking to establish what in effect amounted to a new genre, Artaud avoided the specific comparison of more traditional forms to his concept of drama, that is, the possible relationships of the Theatre of Cruelty to comedy and tragedy, and variations on these two basic forms. In effect, in a form of theatre where anything was legitimate if it contributed to the realization of the dramatist's vision, considerations of genre and elements allowable in a particular genre were somewhat irrelevant, perhaps of academic interest but of no relevance to the dramatist who was to be allowed complete freedom in organizing his materials to elicit a desired response. This attitude is of particular value to the examination of The Duchess of Malfi, since Webster's play is, in fact, such an amalgam of seemingly disparate theatrical and dramatic elements. This
amalgam contains elements of the traditional forms of tragedy and comedy, and it is to these and their use by Webster that I now turn.

Tragedy usually poses positive values, in that a normal, ordered world is seen as existing before and after the period of time covered by the action of the play, if not during it. In Webster's play, there is little sense of a normal world existing before or after, even though he does set his action within such a frame of reference by means of the opening allusion to the order and harmony of the French court and the closing note of hope which accompanies the installation of the young son of the Duchess as her successor. However, this seems to be a very nominal indication of order surrounding disorder, or of order evolving out of disorder. The reassurance at the end of the play, which we usually associate with the close of a tragedy, seems perfunctory and at best only tenuous. One might suggest that Webster was not overly concerned with offering reassurance to his audience; his dramatic vision of life, developed throughout the play, has been one involving a battle of forces in which the strong, by virtue of their superior strength and willingness to forego all traditional sanctities in order to satisfy their innate urges, trample on and destroy those who are weaker. As we have seen, the strong forces have been Evil, the Good have been depicted as weaker, and in consequence have been successfully annihilated. The view of man as animal, of the world
in chaos, as developed in Acts I through V is hardly nullified or explained by the last few lines of The Duchess of Malfi. Webster has not given us any pacifying indication that the Malfi world is to be regarded as the exception rather than the rule. His tragic vision is negative rather than positive, pessimistic rather than optimistic, a vision sensing anarchy rather than order as an inescapable concomitant of life. As such, it is a statement about life, a personal vision which is rightfully seen as a tragic one, but can the play be legitimately regarded as a tragedy? Harold Jenkins suggests that Webster's tragic vision was death-oriented, stressing suffering and agony but not reconciliation or forgiveness.¹

If we further consider The Duchess of Malfi in the light of Elizabethan and Jacobean expectations of the nature of a tragedy, we are hard put, I think, to find where the play offers any really convincing moral instruction or specific indication of God's punishment for transgressions of moral and social laws. The Evil characters destroy themselves in this play; once they have destroyed the Good, they turn on each other like predatory animals. The morally good characters are in part destroyed because of their goodness. The very pointlessness of the destruction of the Duchess places the play in the philosophical context of Theatre of the Absurd. In a very real sense, the Duchess is a misfit in the society Webster depicts, and yet she is the only thoroughly decent, thoroughly likeable character in the play. A relationship to
Brecht was suggested earlier, in that both Webster and Brecht seem to sense the impossibility of remaining good—or surviving if good—in a chaotic and predominantly evil world:

Caresses turn to strangulation.
The sigh of love turns to a cry of fear.
Why are the vultures circling over there?
A girl is going to meet her lover.²

It is difficult to perceive moral instruction per se in a play in which everything which is recognizable as good and worthy of emulation is senselessly destroyed. The Duchess of Malfi would thus hardly fit into Augustan critic John Dennis' designation of tragedy as "... a very solemn lecture, inculcating a particular Providence, and showing it plainly protecting the good and chastising the bad."³ This is what Webster's play becomes in Louis Theobald's adaptation, The Fatal Secret (publ. 1735), in which Ferdinand and the Cardinal die, but the Duchess and Antonio live, as do their children and Bosola, who has been washed clean in Theobald's version and only pretends to strangle the Duchess (off-stage) to satisfy Ferdinand's commands. He then returns her to Antonio. In omitting most of the torture scene, the character of Julia (hence the sub-plot of her affair with the Cardinal which provides such a good contrast to the love of Antonio and the Duchess), and making Bosola the champion of the Duchess against her brothers, Theobald congratulated himself on making the original play into an acceptable piece of theatre, having restrained Webster:
In the original, however, Bosola is the agent of Ferdinand (hence the irrational) until after the refusal of payment, and then becomes an avenging agent in and for himself. He has no convincing affiliation with a Divine Providence. To be sure, God, the Gods, or any kind of exterior controlling force seems distinctly absent from Webster's world. His world is controlled by man, and if we link this with the pointless destruction of the Duchess, we can, I think, see a vision of life emerging which moves the play away from tragedy towards the area of the absurd.

Martin Esslin supplies a good brief definition of absurdity as it is meant to be used in establishing a philosophical point of view: "'Absurd' originally means 'out of harmony' in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.'" The relationship of the Absurd to Theatre of Cruelty is a close one: when man is freed of social restraints, and his inner impulses control his actions, values crumble, reason and propriety no longer govern his relations with his fellow man and, as revealed in a work like The Duchess of Malfi, what ensues is incongruous, unreasonable and illogical—but ultimately explainable in terms of the irrational. However, the term absurd still has unfortunate connotations, and it is perhaps wiser to designate Webster's vision of life as
essentially grotesque rather than absurd, in that he seems to reveal the monstrous cruelty, ugliness and violence of life rather than its total meaninglessness. Semantics becomes a problem in this area, but I feel that whereas Webster seems to be saying that life is valueless in that values have no meaning when man loses his self-control, life itself is not seen as completely without meaning. However, the meaning, or truth of life as Webster depicts it is harsh and difficult for many people to accept, thus at various times he has been denounced for his show of decadence, pessimism and nihilism. As a play dealing with the cruelty of life, The Duchess of Malfi can be seen in the light of Jan Kott's suggestion about the nature of the grotesque's relationship to tragedy:

"Grotesque is more cruel than tragedy," he suggests, partially because in the grotesque world there is only man to blame for catastrophe and suffering:

The tragic and the grotesque worlds are closed, and there is no escape from them. In the tragic world, this compulsory situation has been imposed in turn by the Gods, Fate, the Christian God, Nature and History that has been endowed with reason and inevitability. On the other side, opposed to this arrangement, there was always man. If Nature was absolute, man was unnatural. . . . In the world of the grotesque, downfall cannot be justified by, or blamed on, the absolute.6

The grotesque world, seen as a world cut off from outside help and influence is, I feel, the kind of world depicted in The Duchess of Malfi, despite frequent references to the malignancy of Fortune or the stars. These forces are not so much
malignant as indifferent, and in the play as performed we are given ample visual indication that man is the controlling and destroying force at work.

The view of man in action which the play gives us makes it difficult to agree with Ornstein's contention that the play ultimately reaffirms the dignity of man:

And if it is true that the Duchess is a threnody for the dying Renaissance, then it is altogether fitting that it should reaffirm that ineffable quality of the human spirit which the Renaissance defined as the dignity of man.7

Ornstein has undoubtedly reached this conclusion because of the triumph of the Duchess in the death scene: "Her murderers would drag her down and open her eyes to the 'realities' which they perceive; they would have her share the horror of their lives. They bring her to her knees, but it is the posture of heaven."8 To be sure, there is dignity and triumph here, but we still have the entire fifth act to contend with. By the time the play ends, man's true nature has been revealed, and dignity has been left far behind.

Richard Sewall's observations in The Vision of Tragedy are useful for establishing an absurd/grotesque context for The Duchess of Malfi. Sewall suggests that traditional tragedy, in spite of its delineations of evil and suffering, ultimately ennobles and exalts life. Suffering has a meaning when it leads to the re-ordering of lost or usurped values or the establishment of new ones. However,
when the values that sustain tragedy begin to disintegrate and the 'nerve' fails, the dramatist (who is to some degree the creature as well as the creator of his times) may resort to another alternative: irony.

The dramatist then often becomes an anatomist of evil, and

may make whole plays out of one of the many elements (like irony) which tragedy even at its best holds in uneasy control: pathos, melodrama, the 'absurd'. All these tendencies, which we are pleased to call 'modern', are symptomatic of the default of tragedy and are discernible in the tragic drama of the declining Jacobean stage. Underlying them all is frank despair in the face of the human condition.°

As Esslin suggests of today's Theatre of the Absurd,

The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions."

In some ways, then, the subject matter and thematic implications of The Duchess of Malfi can be seen as analogous to the depiction of the human condition in twentieth century Theatre of the Absurd cum Grotesque; a thematic and philosophical point of view develops from the play which has evolved out of the Theatre of Cruelty elements of the work, i.e., the actual delineation of the anarchic savagery of man and the cruelty of life freed of restraints.

Although Theatre of Cruelty does not seek to offer the reassurance which traditional tragedy does, it does effect or aim to effect a catharsis which is distinctly related to traditional theatrical concepts of purgation of the emotions:
"... like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively." is one way in which Artaud expresses the idea of purgation. As has been noted, the world gone mad motif of the latter half of The Duchess of Malfi—the torture scenes of Act IV and the chaos and slaughter of Act V—and the view of man as mad animal as manifested irrationally in Ferdinand and rationally in Bosola and the Cardinal, presumably reveals to the spectator a view of his submerged self—"... his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, ... even his cannibalism, ..." Frightening and cruel as this is, in terms of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, it is ultimately beneficial:

Whatever the conflicts that haunt the mind of a given period, I defy any spectator to whom such violent scenes will have transferred their blood, who will have felt in himself the transit of a superior action, who will have seen the extraordinary and essential movements of his thought illuminated in extraordinary deeds—the violence and blood having been placed at the service of the violence of the thought—I defy that spectator to give himself up, once outside the theater, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder.11

As Wellwarth observes of Artaud's ideas of cruelty: "This cruelty is seen to some extent as viciousness between human beings. But such scenes must be presented in a manner calculated to purge the spectator of the corresponding emotions in him rather than to arouse in him the desire to imitate."12 Thus the Theatre of Cruelty can be seen as using violent methods to achieve beneficial effects: ". . . by confronting the audience with a picture of disintegration, it sets in
motion an active process of integrative forces in the mind of each individual spectator." This can become the raison d'être of the violence, the bloodshed, the dramatic and theatrical diversity of a work such as The Duchess of Malfi:

The theater is the only place in the world, the last general means we still possess of directly affecting the organism, and, in periods of neurosis and petty sensuality like the one in which we are immersed, of attacking this sensuality by physical means which it cannot withstand.

If the idea of purgation is thus allowed as a valid goal of the Theatre of Cruelty, and we also acknowledge its presence in The Duchess of Malfi, we arrive not too far out of line with Muriel Bradbrook's contention that the Elizabethan play was expected to offer moral instruction which was further expected to have an immediate and powerful effect. While what we are offered in The Duchess of Malfi is not sententious moral instruction per se, it is nevertheless instruction, and it does have an immediate and powerful effect. Perhaps this is thus a much more valid and satisfactory way of attempting to sum up the final effect of the play than arguing pro and con on whether or not there is a definite moral commitment present in the work. There is a point of view presented, which we as spectators are to see, relate to ourselves and our society, and presumably leave the theatre if not ennobled, reassured or satisfied by once again seeing virtue triumph over evil, at least enlightened, shaken, perhaps shocked and confused, but, hopefully, inclined to do
some thinking about what we have just seen revealed of ourselves.

In addition to the threads of absurdity, grotesquery, cruelty and catharsis which are woven into the texture of The Duchess of Malfi, our total response to the play is further complicated by the presence of elements of comedy or near-comedy and satire in the Malfi world. The term black comedy has come into frequent use as critics attempt to evaluate many works of the contemporary Theatre of the Absurd. I suggested earlier in this study that much of Act V is comic in its effect, albeit too terrible for laughter. If laughter is present, it is the type of uncomfortable laughter which emerges when an audience is placed in an equivocal position—horrified but fascinated; embarrassed, tense and nervous. This is what happens in the last two acts of The Duchess of Malfi. A bad production of the play will elicit only laughter, a laughter which signifies a lack of involvement and further implies derision for and rejection of the extremity of the dramatist’s point of view. What is meant to be grotesque and terrifying degenerates into silly horror and melodrama. A good production, and they appear to have been few and far between, might still elicit laughter, but it would hopefully be of a much more uncertain variety, the form of laughter which evolves from the terrible grotesqueness of the action, from the constantly shifting blend of the painful, the ironic and the perversely comic so that the audience never quite
knows how it should react. Consider three incidents of Act V as examples: the death of Julia is painful and ironic, as is the death of Antonio, which goes a step further in being almost comic because of the incredible eagerness of Bosola to kill before he is even sure who he is killing. Soon after, the death of the Cardinal plays even further with these three conflicting elements, somewhat minimizing the painful and developing even further the unfunny humour arising from the deliberations of the Cardinal's attendants as to whether or not he really is in danger or only pretending to be, as he had told them he might do to test them. A marvellously tense stage situation develops from a murder being executed in one area, and a discussion about whether or not it is a murder being held at the same time in a second area by a group of rather simple-minded court attendants. We see the murder, and hear the discussion, and the very uncertainty of how we should react is what creates the effectiveness of the moment.

The under-current of comedy in *The Duchess of Malfi* has been perceived by at least one critic as emerging long before the chaotic fifth act. Jane Marie Leucke notes that the subject matter of the early scenes of the play is more usual to comedy than tragedy: "The very manner of the handling of scenes during the first three acts is in the manner of comedy, for although suspense is built up . . . a logical sequence would have called for a happy ending." The point is a valid one, but we should notice that the verbal imagery
has in fact given an indication of the non-comic developments to come long before they actually happen. Further, we should note Miss Leucke's indication that "... a logical sequence would have called for a happy ending.", the point of the play of course being that this world, when it gets out of control, is completely illogical. Nevertheless, a case could be made for ambiguity of reaction to the play from the outset—in subject matter, the early scenes might suggest comedy, but in verbal imagery and dialogue we are pulled in quite a different direction. One must suggest that the ambiguity is intentional; it is so carefully controlled and developed that it seems ridiculous to accuse Webster of muddled thinking and poor dramaturgy. The play is complex, but not confused. Miss Leucke criticizes Webster for his injudicious mixing of "... comic elements fraught with tragic overtones, or tragic elements that tend to laughter."\(^{18}\) whereas I feel this is essentially what makes the play so engrossing.

Miss Leucke further suggests that the blend of comedy and tragedy in *The Duchess of Malfi* results in satire emerging as the dominant genre in the play. Satire is undeniably present in Webster's writing, albeit a harsh and bitter satire which, for F.L. Lucas, suggests a comparison with Swift, both seen as alike in "The bitterness, the savage wit, the almost morbid rage to strip the mask from the baseness of human life, the unutterable despair. ..."\(^{19}\) It should be noted that the elements of satire which are undeniably present in *The
Duchess of Malfi are centralized almost entirely in dialogue, and in the language and verbal images put into the mouth of Bosola, whom Alvin Kernan suggests is a textbook model of a malcontent satirist, one who sees "... the extreme satiric side of life...", and is completely despaired of man and of honesty. Because Bosola's utterances are so consistently vile and repulsive, the satire inherent in them may be linked with the idea of verbal cruelty in the imagery discussed earlier in the paper. As satire, i.e., as yet another genre at work in the play, it adds further density and complexity to the work as a whole, and a further level of response for the spectator.

Thus in the examination of only a few basic elements, we can see that The Duchess of Malfi is a not atypical illustration of T.S. Eliot's contention that Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is an "impure" art form. As we have observed, The Theatre of Cruelty is also an impure art form—intentionally so. In Webster's play, we can discern elements of tragedy, of comedy or dark comedy, satire, melodrama, sensationalism, grotesquery and absurdity. All of these elements are drawn into the Theatre of Cruelty, a perverse and omnivorous genre which engulfs and assimilates any aspects of other forms of drama which can be of use in the realization of the dramatist's personal vision of the inner condition of man, presented in "... a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator.
seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces."²²

The vision presented in *The Duchess of Malfi* is one which will be rejected by many. A definitive epitome of spectator rejection of violence and cruelty has been included in *Marat/Sade*:

> I always thought plays were meant to be entertaining, But how can entertainment deal in sarcasm and violence? I always thought poets strove to achieve pure beauty, But what is beautiful about whipping and corpses? And I was always taught philosophy's intention was to elevate man above the beasts, But, Monsieur de Sade, your philosophy seems cold—almost savage. And worst of all—pessimistic.²³

An answer to such criticism, whether it be directed at the extremity of the vision of *The Duchess of Malfi* or at a modern work such as *Marat/Sade*, is found in *The Theater and its Double*. I have used the reference earlier, but it bears repeating. A work like Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* seen as Theatre of Cruelty

> . . . releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and powers are dark, it is the fault not of . . . the theater, but of life.²⁴

Surely there is no need to designate Webster a decadent because of his vision. As Martin Esslin suggests of contemporary theatre,

> Ultimately, a phenomenon like the Theatre of the Absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces but expresses modern man's endeavour to come to
terms with the world in which he lives. It attempts to make him face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment. 25

I do not feel we would be far wrong if we saw Webster attempting to do much the same thing in and for his own chaotic and uncertain era.
CONCLUSIONS

The preceding discussion has attempted to establish a relationship between one Jacobean play and a twentieth century theory of drama. If the relationship is allowed as valid, in that Artaud's theories help to point out qualities in *The Duchess of Malfi* which were present in it on the occasion of its first performance, it seems reasonable to suggest that other works from the period might profitably be viewed in a comparable context. Presumably, the horror, sensationalism and grotesque qualities of many Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas could be seen as an attempt by their authors to express, independently and yet utilizing a common pool of standard dramatic and theatrical materials, their visions of the human condition as they felt it existed in their era. One might thus suggest that a Jacobean Theatre of Cruelty existed in fact if not in name, and that Total Theatre, even if not officially designated as such, was practised on the stages of the Globe and the Blackfriars and elsewhere.

In the theatre of the Jacobean period, works by a number of authors seem to reveal analogous trains of thought, comparable perceptions of the fundamentally violent nature of man, the anarchy and cruelty of existence which was held under tenuous control by the restraints of law, religion and morality. The advantage of time allows us to look at the
Jacobean drama as a whole and see in it a quality of expression and a point of view towards life which, in its attempts to come to terms with the meaning of existence, is in many ways comparable to the points of view about man and his society which have emerged independently in twentieth century drama. The styles of individual dramatists may vary, but if we were to read works by writers such as Webster, Ford, Marston and Middleton, to name only a few, in the light of Artaud's theories, certain elemental themes, expressions of basic truths of human nature and fundamental attitudes to life could be perceived which continue or re-emerge in the works of twentieth century playwrights, such as Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter and Weiss, who have developed largely since Artaud, and others, such as Brecht and Jarry, who have expressed comparable ideas independent of any specific influence from Artaud. In effect, this continuity suggests that what is called the avant-garde movement in drama really represents in some ways only a reappearance of ideas and attitudes which have been expressed before. This may help explain why the Jacobean drama is gradually being re-evaluated and freed from the cen­suring criticism of nineteenth and early twentieth century writers such as Sir William Watson and William Archer. Possibly as a result of recent developments in the theatre, a rapport with the Jacobean dramatists' points-of-view is now more readily established in a spectator or reader. Both the then and now Theatres of Cruelty (and of the Absurd or
Grotesque) can be seen as representing analogous artistic responses to the human condition, be it social, political, religious, moral, or any combination of these. Although the approach has yet to be explored in depth, a more satisfactory appraisal of the Jacobean "horror" play may evolve from linking it with contemporary dramatic expression than has hitherto been possible through regarding it as a deviate and decadent form of tragedy.

Further study of the Jacobean drama using Artaud as an interpretive guide might thus be comparative, investigating the analogous then and now responses to the human condition, and also expansive, looking at the Jacobean drama as a whole to see how extensive and varied the responses were within the period. This study of The Duchess of Malfi has in many ways been exploratory in intent, to test the feasibility of comparing two widely separated eras of drama and dramatic theory, and at the same time to suggest the possibilities of using the newer drama and theory to explain and re-interpret the older.

Some initial points of comparison have been suggested in the paper, notably those between Webster and Brecht, on the basis of their comparable attitudes to the impossibility of remaining good in a corrupt world, and between Webster and Weiss in their use of Total Theatre and the concept of man as animal. For The Duchess of Malfi we might also note in passing the relationship between Webster's Ferdinand and
Jarry's King Ubu as comparable delineations of irrational man. Critical descriptions of Ubu remind one of Webster's Duke: Wellwarth calls him "... the prototype of the elemental figure unencumbered by inhibition or respect for the veneer of law and order.", while Esslin observes that

He is a terrifying image of the animal nature of man, his cruelty and ruthlessness. ... He is mean, vulgar, and incredibly brutal, a monster that appeared ludicrously exaggerated in 1896, but was far surpassed by reality by 1945. Once again, an intuitive image of the dark side of human nature that a poet had projected onto the stage proved prophetically true.¹

Webster's Act V delineation of a world gone mad, with man seen as a predatory animal freed of social restraints and inhibitions, appears again in a new form in the last act of Ionesco's Rhinoceros (1958). The resultant meaninglessness of traditional values and safeguards associated with the law and religion, which we noted as an important thematic line in The Duchess of Malfi, is one of the themes discernible in Genet's The Balcony (1960). Also, Webster's play owes much of its terror to the lack of discernible and definitely stated motives for the machinations of Ferdinand and the Cardinal; this technique of mystification and equivocation, used by Webster to show that we cannot expect to understand the workings of the irrational, is one of the basic characteristics of the plays of Harold Pinter, most notably used in The Birthday Party (1960) and A Slight Ache (1961). These few examples might suggest that a comparative study of Jacobean and Contemporary dramas could
prove of interest and value.

Within the Jacobean period, using Artaud's theory as an aid to discerning trends and tendencies, one could quickly see that Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is not an isolated theatrical freak. As noted, a Jacobean Theatre of Cruelty did not exist in name, and in extending the type of interpretation and approach adopted for *The Duchess of Malfi* to other works, each play would obviously have to be considered individually. However, at this stage it seems possible to suggest a few works which might be related either entirely or in part to the concepts of Cruelty, the Absurd/Grotesque and Total Theatre postulated for Webster's play. Certainly Webster's other major work, *The White Devil* would profitably bear investigation in this area. Ford's *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*, admired and discussed by Artaud, seems worthy of further examination, as does his *The Broken Heart*. Marston, so important an influence on Webster, particularly in the characterization of Bosola, deserves considerable attention, directed in particular at *The Malcontent*, *Antonio and Mellida* and possibly *Antonio's Revenge*. One might also suggest investigation of Chapman's *Bussy d'Ambois*, Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* and Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. These seem the most immediate and obvious choices, although detailed investigation would undoubtedly suggest other works for consideration. Thus, by going directly to the dramas of the Jacobean period and examining each play on its own intrinsic merits, we could, I feel, discern an attitude to
life and a means of giving artistic expression to the discord and uncertainty inherent in this attitude of which The Duchess of Malfi is really only one example.
FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York, 1958). Whenever quoting directly from this work, I will use the translator's spelling of theater. Elsewhere, theatre is used.

2 Artaud, pp. 27-28.


4 Artaud, p. 28.

5 Artaud, p. 99.

6 Artaud, p. 100.

7 In 1935, Artaud directed his adaptation of the Cenci, combining texts by Shelley and Stendhal, the only production of his planned Theatre of Cruelty. The production was regarded as an interesting failure. Also of interest are Artaud's play The Spurt of Blood and his production scenario for Strindberg's Ghost Sonata, both printed in the Tulane Drama Review article cited above.

8 The fact that "All of the plays of the current avant-garde experimental drama have a common source in the theories of Antonin Artaud. . . ." is discussed in George E. Wellwarth's chapter on Artaud in The Theater of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama (New York, 1964), pp. 14-27. Quotations from this work will also adhere to the American spelling of theater.

CHAPTER ONE

Throughout this and the following chapter, I use dramatic to specify elements in the play which are not fully dependent on a stage performance for effectiveness or comprehension. Theatrical is used in a much wider sense to mean elements which need stage realization for proper effectiveness. Thus Webster's use of a Machiavellian figure would be regarded as a dramatic device, whereas the masque of madmen in IV.ii would be theatrical. It is at best an arbitrary division which remains flexible.

2"'The Duchess of Malfi',' " 19th Century, LXXXVII (1920), p. 132.

3William Archer, The Old Drama and the New (Boston, 1923).

4Throughout this section I have made considerable use of Miss Bradbrook's work Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (Cambridge, 1957), chs. I-V. Also of use was Madeleine Doran, Endeavors of Art: A study of form in Elizabethan drama (Madison, 1964).

5Most notable for The Duchess of Malfi are the studies of Gunnar Boklund, 'The Duchess of Malfi': Sources, Themes, Characters (Cambridge, Mass., 1962) and Robert W. Dent, John Webster's Borrowings (Berkeley, 1960).


7"Dramatists," in Essays, p. 117.

 CHAPTER TWO

1 Esslin, p. 293.

2 Artaud, p. 145. The article is a review of a mime created by Jean-Louis Barrault, based on William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, performed in Paris in 1935.

3 Artaud, p. 100.

4 Artaud, pp. 28-30.

5 In addition to Leech's analysis, discussed in the text, the following are of some interest: James L. Calderwood, "The Duchess of Malfi': Styles of Ceremony," *Essays in Criticism*, XII (1962), 133-147, suggests that Ferdinand seeks the ritual purgation of his own tainted blood in the ritual purgation of his sister, i.e., purgation by proxy; J.R. Mulryne, "The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi'," in *Jacobean Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London, 1960), pp. 201-225, suggests, without developing the idea, that the long ritual is a frustrated substitute for the sex act. Both Muriel Bradbrook in *Themes and Conventions* and McD. Emslie, "Motives in 'Malfi'," *Essays in Criticism*, IX (1959), 391-405, see, wrongly I think, the Duchess submitting to the persecution as a ritual expiation of her offence against her brothers and her people. This assumes that the Duchess is guilty of two crimes—remarriage, and remarriage below her station. As I Develop in Chapter IV, I am not prepared to accept this point of view.


7 Ibid., p. 61.
Artaud, p. 27.

Artaud, pp. 30-31.


E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (London, 1963). This idea is developed in Chapter VIII.


Leech's discussion of the scene is in John Webster: A Critical Study (London, 1951), pp. 81-86.


Appendix II of the Revels Plays edition of The Duchess of Malfi has a transcription of a surviving manuscript copy of the song sung by the Madmen. See pp. 210-213.

Brown, p. xxiii.


Esslin, p. 306.

Esslin, pp. 294-295.

CHAPTER THREE


Doran, p. 294.

Doran, p. 293.


Davies, p. 93.

Wellwarth, p. 16.

Davies, p. 91.

Wellwarth, p. 17.


Artaud, p. 79.


Shakespeare Our Contemporary, p. 110.

Brown, p. xlix.

Ornstein, p. 135.

Ornstein, p. 7.

Cecil, p. 32 et passim.

Allison, p. 273.

Ornstein, p. 44. The comment is made as a general view of a thematic implication in Jacobean tragedy as a whole, but its specific relevance to The Duchess of Malfi seems worthy of notice.


Themes and Conventions, p. 197.

Themes and Conventions, p. 136.

Esslin, p. 303.

Marat/Sade, pp. 40-41. (Act I, Scene 15.)

The Cankered Muse, p. 251.

This is the main point made in Ornstein's excellent discussion of Webster, pp. 128-150.
Archer, "'The Duchess of Malfi'," p. 126. Archer dwells at length on all the glaring flaws and inconsistencies he has discerned in plot development, character action and motivation.

This is fully discussed by John Russell Brown in the introduction to the Revels Plays edition of The Duchess of Malfi, pp. xxvii-xli.


Artaud, pp. 31-32.

Artaud, p. 60.

Webster: 'The Duchess of Malfi', p. 61.

Quoted by Lucas in Works, I, p. 15.

Ibid., p. 30.

Wellwarth, p. 20.

Wellwarth, p. 22.


Ian Scott-Kilvert, John Webster (London, 1964), p. 34.


Artaud, p. 44; p. 46.

Of some interest here would be the unpubl. diss. (Syracuse, 1962) by S.V. Sternlicht, "John Webster's Imagery," which, as outlined in Dissertation Abstracts, XXIII (1963), 2905-2906, deals with iterative images and image clusters in The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil.

The Language of Tragedy, p. 128.

Ibid., p. 129.
CHAPTER FOUR

1 Of interest here would be the unpubl. diss. (Arkansas, 1957) by Muriel West, "The Devil and John Webster," which, as outlined in Dissertation Abstracts, XVII (1957), 1077-1078, discusses devil imagery in Webster's two major plays.

2 Allison, p. 271.

3 Kernan, p. 238.

4 Artaud, p. 27.

5 Bogard, p. 39.

6 Allison, p. 270.

7 The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven, 1962), p. 81.


9 Stoll for example sees Webster as the "... stern justicer of human error--of the folly of Antonio and the Duchess." John Webster, p. 192.


15 Webster: 'The Duchess of Malfi', p. 27.

16 Ornstein, p. 23.

17 Kernan, p. 237.

CHAPTER FIVE

1 Jenkins, p. 54.


3 Quoted in Scott-Kilvert, p. 5.

4 Lucas, I, p. 7. Also of interest here is the short article by B.L. Joseph, "Louis Theobald and Webster," Comparative Literature Studies, XVII (1945), 29-31.

5 Esslin, p. xix.

6 Kott, p. 74; p. 92.

7 Ornstein, p. 150.

8 Ornstein, p. 147.

9 Sewall, p. 82.

10 Esslin, p. xviii.

11 Artaud, p. 31; p. 92; p. 82.

12 Wellwarth, p. 20.

13 Esslin, p. 302.

14 Artaud, p. 81.

15 Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions, p. 76ff.


18 Leucke, p. 279.

19 Lucas, I, p. 46.

20 Kernan, p. 237.

Artaud, pp. 82-83.

This passage was apparently added during the New York performances of the play, and appears only in the recorded version (Caedmon TRS-312) spoken by Coullmier at the end of Act I, Scene 20. Arrangement and punctuation of the passage is consequently my own, although guided by the style of the published text.

Artaud, p. 31.

Esslin, p. 316.

CONCLUSIONS

Wellwarth, p. 17; Esslin, pp. 225-226.
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