The Static Protagonist in *The Duchess of Malfi*

Despite centuries of serious and sensitive attention to John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, critics continue to debate the play's moral vision, its genre, even the artistic competence of its author. Yet no one has dealt specifically with the play's most remarkable feature: the static nature of its central figure. The Duchess does not develop, or grow, or learn anything significant from her experiences. To recognize this fact is not to indict Webster for foolish dramaturgy. Rather, it is to locate *The Duchess of Malfi* within a small group of important plays distinguished by the static natures of their protagonists. Such plays have been written in every era of Western drama—examples include *Prometheus Bound*, Racine's *Phaedra*, *All for Love*, *The Masterbuilder*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Lorca's *House of Bernarda Alba*, and at an existential extreme, *Waiting for Godot*. Although individually recognized as important and dramatically effective, these plays are often treated as "eccentric," as succeeding in spite of their refusal to fit neatly into normative schemes of dramatic form. It is not necessary, however, to treat each of these plays as sui generis, since they have one shaping element in common: in every instance, the protagonist remains essentially unchanged, and this constancy both governs dramatic structure and becomes the focus of dramatic meaning. Examination of these plays reveals the recurring characteristics of what I would call "static protagonist drama," and thus makes it possible to approach *The Duchess of Malfi* with an appropriately specialized set of critical questions.

A static protagonist goes nowhere. For the master-type of all static protagonists, Prometheus, this statement is literally true; he is physically chained, locked in an emblematic representation of his psychic stasis. The fully developed logic of such stasis can be described in traditional terms as the absence of anagnorisis: a
static protagonist begins his play with all the self-knowledge he will ever have. Whether profoundly heroic or neurotically obsessive, all static protagonists are chained to their initial perceptions of themselves. Drama more generally traces the psychological readjustment of the protagonist in the face of changed circumstances or new information. To take an example from Shakespeare, Lear on the heath must bring his moral perceptions into congruence with a world in which he can no longer hold illusions of absolute authority, and as he does so we say he “develops” or “grows.” These normative plots develop sequentially through actions (initiatory or responsive) that embody significant choices by the central character, the consequences of each action generating the next choice. In static protagonist drama, however, a single crucial choice—representing the incarnation of the protagonist’s self-conception—is made very early in the play, sometimes even posited as having occurred before the play begins. The drama is then structured as succeeding reenactments of the informing choice. The play’s pattern is not developmental but tautological. Again, Prometheus Bound is representative: it is constructed as a sequence of encounters, each leading to a reaffirmation by Prometheus of his defiance of Zeus.

This structural principle points to the radical tension in static protagonist drama. The word “static” is etymologically related to words meaning “to stand,” and a static protagonist is one who has found something for which he must stand (in the sense of “take a stand,” “stand up for,” and so on). For example, Eliot’s Becket must preserve the priority of religious doctrine against the encroachments of patriotism, personal loyalties, pragmatic humanism, and his own pride. Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon, on the other hand, struggle to maintain a minimal humanity in the face of absurdity. But whatever his specific allegiance, the static protagonist is absolutely bound to a deeply rooted internal necessity which is nonnegotiable, inaccessible to compromise. At the same time, he is portrayed in a world absolutely antithetical to his stand; he is subject to an intractable external necessity of which Zeus in Prometheus Bound is the archetypal representation. (The negative possibility of this pattern—and its tautological dramatic format—is an obsessive neurosis that is publicly dysfunctional; the various addictions in O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey Into Night, for example, work in this way.)

Typically, the dramatist must somehow validate the protagonist’s intransigence while setting him within a persuasively intractable environment. If he does so, static protagonist drama generates in its audience a tension between a sympathetically pragmatic de-
sire that the protagonist compromise with or surrender to exigency and a morally rooted, profound fear that he will do so. In such drama a particular sort of catharsis can derive from a simultaneous relief that the character is released from this struggle (most often but not necessarily through death) and that we, the audience, are no longer compelled to experience powerfully competing emotions. (Modern drama frequently foregoes any catharsis and, instead, focuses on the frustration of unending tautology, as in Waiting for Godot or Pirandello’s Henry IV.)

The characteristics of static protagonist drama, as outlined above, point to the kinds of questions a critic should bring to such plays: what is the informing choice and how is it reenacted? how is the relationship between internal and external necessity articulated dramatically? how does the play generate a catharsis of conflicting emotions? To answer these and related questions for The Duchess of Malfi is also to understand those facets of the play that critics have found most troubling, including the morality of the Duchess’s behavior and Webster’s attitude toward it, the apparently peculiar dramaturgy of having her die in the fourth act, the significance of Bosola (whom some critics wish to promote to the role of protagonist), and the crucial function of the set pieces which can seem to disrupt the play’s poetic and dramatic force. Indeed, the advantage of approaching The Duchess of Malfi as static protagonist drama is that doing so clarifies the value of the play’s superficially disparate or discordant aspects and thus enables us to comprehend more fully Webster’s remarkable achievement.

The initial impulse for drama in The Duchess of Malfi arises from the refusal of a strong-willed woman to submit to the irrational demands of her male relatives. In one sense, the Duchess’s insistence on marrying without her brothers’ consent must be accepted as given, as the assumption on which the play is predicated. As audience, then, we are not obligated to establish motives for this act, only to recognize its centrality. Indeed, one should beware of narrowly particularizing and thereby diminishing the Duchess’s motives; for example, to see her as simply overwhelmed by lust for her steward reduces Webster’s play to an exemplum warning against marriage outside one’s station. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the structural and thematic implications of this motivating, if apparently motiveless, act of defiance. Although I would not want to call Webster—or Aeschylus, or Racine, or Ibsen—absurdist, Albert Camus’ description of the rebel and his rebellion is pertinent both to The Duchess of Malfi and to static protagonist drama in general:
What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion . . . What does he mean by saying “no”? He means, for example, that “this has been going on too long,” “up to this point yes, beyond it no,” “you are going too far,” or, again, “there is a limit beyond which you shall not go.” In other words, his no affirms the existence of a borderline.\(^2\)

When the Duchess says, “Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred/ Lay in my way unto this marriage, / I’d make them my low footsteps” (I.i.341–43),\(^3\) she asserts the limits of another’s authority over her. She asserts herself. The significance for dramatic structure of such an action can be inferred from Camus’ description of the rebel’s feelings:

In every act of rebellion, the rebel simultaneously experiences a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself. Thus he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being gratuitous that he is prepared to support it no matter what the risks.\(^4\)

For the Duchess, the risks are great, but she will repeatedly adhere to the “standard of values” implied by her initial assertion. Camus is interested primarily in political rebellion, but his words here apply with equal force to the private rebellion of the Duchess. In refusing to accede to unreasonable commands, she affirms her selfhood. By asserting the limits of another’s influence, she defines herself. And “define” is appropriate in all its denotations: the expression of meaning presupposes and reinforces the discovery of meaning; the marking of one’s boundaries is the delineation of one’s self. And scrupulous adherence to one’s own definition of oneself is the essential quality of integrity.

It may seem odd to locate the Duchess’s crucial decision in the defiance of her brothers rather than in her marriage to Antonio, since critics who wish to devalue her generally ascribe the ensuing disasters to the Duchess’s inappropriate marriage. But the play’s structure encourages the interpretation given above. Whatever we may infer about the Duchess and her motives, the order in which events occur places emphasis on her defiance, of which the marriage seems dramatically to be an immediate consequence rather
than a cause. (*Post hoc* reasoning may be faulty logic, but it carries considerable weight in the theater.) Recognizing the priority of the Duchess’s self-definition to her marriage enables us to see the remainder of her actions as reenactments of her informing choice.

Once the Duchess has defined her essential self, she must preserve that essence against the onslants of exigency. Those efforts with their ultimately painful consequences provide the play’s gross structure as, in scene after scene, the integrity of the Duchess, her commitment to a self-defined identity, is challenged and affirmed. The Duchess begins by controlling the wooing and wedding scene (I.i.), but each of the succeeding scenes in which she appears increases the magnitude of the threatened encroachments on her integrity. She parries Bosola’s attempts to lead her into an admission of her pregnancy (II.i.); she stands up bravely to Duke Ferdinand’s cruel accusations (III.ii.); she faces imprisonment, torture, and finally death—all with dignity (Act IV). Each of these scenes reenacts her initial refusal to accede in her brothers’ attempt to categorize and control her. Again and again, the male characters in this play try to circumscribe the Duchess within their definitions of her: for example, she is perceived as a stock lascivious widow (the brothers); as an unattainable beauty (Antonio in the betrothal scene); as a whore (Bosola, Ferdinand). Even the tortures in the prison suggest that Ferdinand and Bosola assume they can locate her points of psychological vulnerability. Repeatedly, however, she insists on defining herself, on refusing to participate in the other characters’ narrow perceptions of her. Surely, part of the frisson audiences feel at the magnificent line, “I am Duchess of Malfi still” (IV. ii. 142), arises from their relief that she has not capitulated, that she does not invalidate the identity she has defended at so great a cost.

The full power of this line depends on Webster’s convincing his audience that the Duchess’s initial self-assertion is a genuine act of integrity, an integrity worth the expenditure necessary to maintain it. His sympathetic portrayal of the Duchess—a glance at his sources in Painter and Belleforest reveals the degree to which he has suppressed their disapproval of her—engages our affection and the concomitant desire that she survive. If the play is to generate the conflicting emotions characteristic of static protagonist drama, the audience must also come to respect the abiding value of her integrity so deeply that its hopes for the Duchess are counterbalanced by fears that her survival might be achieved at the cost of this integrity. Webster undertakes the difficult task of teaching his audience what this integrity means. He succeeds
largely by permeating his play (consciously or unconsciously) with modulations of a central complex metaphor which orchestrates the tension between the Duchess's integrity and the forces that threaten it.

The controlling metaphor in *The Duchess Of Malfi* is one of psychic energy diffused, obstructed, and reflected: integrity like the Duchess' is radiant, but the world presented in this play continually works to intercept such radiance. This pattern of reflected energy animates the entire play, including its language and characterization, but it will be useful to consider first how this metaphor operates through the play's pervasive imagery of light and darkness. Throughout the play the Duchess herself becomes identified with light, partly through direct statement but even more powerfully through the manipulation of lighting possible in the Blackfriars (where the play was almost certainly first performed). Our first knowledge of the Duchess in the play comes with Antonio's "character" of her that culminates in the line, "She stains the time past, lights the time to come" (I.i.209). This notion of the Duchess as a source of light is intensified because she alone of all the characters (except in Delio's echo of her at II.i.159) gives orders about the bringing or taking away of lights. When she feels the pangs of labor coming on, she calls out "Lights to my chamber" (II.i.158). In the prison she orders, "Take hence the lights" (IV.i.29). And as she realizes the cruel trick with the dead man's hand to which her brother has subjected her, she cries, "Hah! lights!—O, horrible" (IV.i.53). Even in the prison where she has been stripped of secular authority, she controls the lighting. Finally, in the echo scene Antonio hears his wife's voice and claims that with the last words of the echo, "on the sudden, a clear light / Presented [him] a face folded in sorrow" (V.iii.44-45).

Light is a central image associated not only with the Duchess but also more specifically with her integrity. James P. Driscoll has identified the Duchess's integrity as the force that impels the Cardinal's and the Duke's malice toward their sister:

The motives of Ferdinand and the Cardinal are similar to the motives of the Athenians who poisoned Socrates and the Pharisees who crucified Christ. The Duchess, like Socrates and Christ, is an integrity figure whose life is an ever-present reminder of the moral bankruptcy of those who live without integrity. The presence of the integrity figure forces those who lack integrity to question their own moral vexation: they are motivated by the desire to avoid the realization of their own motivations.6
Significantly, Ferdinand continually identifies his sister with light. One of the punishments he wishes to inflict on the Duchess and her lover is to “dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur, / Wrap them in ’t, and then light them like a match” (II.v.69-70). His ranting in this scene concludes with his determination to “fix her in a general eclipse” (II.v.79). And when he confronts the Duchess with his anger at her having a lover or a husband, the Duke rails “let not the sun / Shine on him, til he’s dead” (III.ii.103-104). In effect, these three speeches indicate, respectively, Ferdinand’s wishes to see his sister consumed in light, to extinguish her light, to separate her husband from the light. In prison too he claims that the darkness suits her: she was “too much i’ th’ light” (IV. i. 42). He surely intends a sexual innuendo, but his words reveal further evidence of the envy Driscoll discusses. Her “light,” like that of a painting rich in chiaroscuro, both emphasizes and is emphasized by his “darkness,” a darkness he acknowledges only after her death: “I’ll go hunt the badger, by Owl-light: ‘Tis a deed of darkness” (IV.ii.334-35). And in his madness (Act V), he becomes increasingly a creature of darkness, the wolf who prowls graveyards at night; he is haunted by his shadow, the dark side of himself reflected in the sunlight. Of course, Ferdinand’s clearest recognition of his sister’s light occurs in the center of Webster’s most famous line—“Mine eyes Dazzle” (IV.ii.264). Her radiant integrity, even in (apparent) death, wounds his eyes. Similarly in Act V, the Doctor’s foolery about sunburning prompts Ferdinand to state, “I have cruel sore eyes” (V.ii.64). The Duchess may be dead, but her light persists as a painful torment. The Duke’s madness resembles in function Gloucester’s blindness in *King Lear*: Ferdinand’s lycanthropy literalizes his beastliness and his sore eyes transmute into corporeality his sister’s metaphoric light.

Once we recognize that light is a key image for the Duchess, more specifically for her integrity, we can restate the problem she faces in maintaining that integrity: she tries to lead a considered life, to maintain the harmony of her light with that of the stars where “all things are written . . . if we could find spectacles to read them” (III.i.61–62). But the world of *The Duchess of Malfi* is filled with oily mists, and mists obstruct the path of light, reflecting it back toward its source. Webster seems to conceptualize personal identity and integrity as a kind of light (or other energy) that, however it strives to maintain its connection with cosmic order, is continually obstructed, deflected, or reflected from its proper path. It is easy enough to catalog the play’s many references to nets, low roofs, binding, cobwebs, whirlpools, prisons,
cages—constraints and obstructions of all sorts; to the glasses and lenses through which light is filtered; to mirrors, reflecting pools, and echos. So I will concentrate here on the more abstract ways the pattern of obstruction and reflection orders The Duchess of Malfi and illuminates the relationship between the Duchess’ unchanging integrity and the intractable forces hostile to it.

It is a psychological truism that one measure of a stable identity is its ability to give and receive love—in the terms of Webster’s metaphor, to extend one’s light outward to embrace another human being. So it is with the Duchess, whose light shines faithfully on Antonio even after her death (V.iii.44–45). On the other hand, the promiscuity of Julia, the Cardinal’s mistress, represents a failure to direct one’s love properly; her light is refracted and diffused. More interesting is the case of Ferdinand with his clearly incestuous feelings toward the Duchess. Incest is, of course, an only slightly displaced narcissism in which one’s love turns back on the person closest to oneself, in this instance a twin sister. In this version of the central metaphor, the light of the Duchess’ integrity pierces through the mists around her, while the identities of the other characters are obstructed, refracted, and reflected back toward themselves.

Indeed, both of the Arragonian brothers are consistently objects of their own reflected evil. Their manifestations of guilt for the destruction of the Duchess are parallel. When Ferdinand sees his apparently dead sister, he cries, “Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young” (IV.ii.264), and the Cardinal in his meditation on hell says, “When I look into the fishponds, in my garden / Methinks I see a thing, arm’d with a rake / That seems to strike at me” (V.v.5–7). Ferdinand cannot bear to look upon the face of his sister; the two were twins, and he sees in her death not only a reminder of his own mortality, but also the death of any potential for good he might once have had. Similarly, the Cardinal’s own reflection in the pond is distorted in his eyes to include a dark and evil “thing.” Each of the brothers sees reflected part of his own nature: one, the good that has died; the other, the evil that remains. The awareness of corruption is for the Cardinal externalized into a threatening demon, but for Ferdinand it becomes an internal torture. The Doctor gives Ferdinand’s description of his lycanthropy: “[Ferdinand] Said he was a wolf, only the difference / Was, a wolf’s skin was hairy on the outside, / His on the inside” (V.ii.16–18). The Duchess’ death becomes Ferdinand’s psychological “hairshirt” and draws the Cardinal into the machinations that culminate in his own death. With a poetic justice, the Cardinal’s plottings cause him to be an unwitting conspirator in
Bosola’s revenge. His coldly rational evil has himself as its final target, just as Ferdinand’s passionate rage finally turns inward. The Arragonian brothers become victims of their own rhetoric. The bestial imagery used obsessively by Ferdinand prefigures his madness, and the Machiavellian discourse characteristic of the Cardinal reverberates on him in permitting his assassination.

This aspect of the Duke and the Cardinal is symptomatic of another obstructive mist in the world of The Duchess of Malfi, the fog which I would call “cultural rhetoric.” Just as the imagery of light and darkness animates the atmospheric resistance of the Duchess’ world to her considered constancy, so Webster’s use of cultural rhetoric emphasizes the specifically societal obstacles to a sustained integrity. The sanctioned rhetoric of any culture both manifests and reinforces its modes of maintaining control over impulses detrimental to the smooth functioning of society. While such controls are necessary for a society’s survival, they and their rhetorical expressions can become increasingly rigid and formulaic. Carried far enough, this rigidity renders certain human possibilities simply unimaginable as it obscures them entirely: for example, neither Ferdinand nor the Cardinal is capable of comprehending the Duchess’s marriage as an act of love. Robert Whitman has defended the Arragonian brothers (along with Francisco and Montes in The White Devil), arguing that they represent the legitimate demands of the Apollonian aspect of a divided human nature. As he says, “they are obsessed with law and duty, with family bonds and obligations, and with revenge on those who violate these codes. Indeed, as a group these two pairs seem to stand . . . for the institutionalized morality of church, state, and family, using the power of those institutions to overwhelm the rebellious Dionysian impulses in . . . the Duchess.”7 Although Whitman’s “moral paradox” is pertinent to many tragedies, including The White Devil, he misses the point with reference to The Duchess of Malfi. The world of that play is, as G. Wilson Knight says, “socially rotten”;8 in it, cultural demands, including those Whitman justifies as Apollonian, have become so rigid that all but a very few impulses must be repressed, thus creating a fertile ground for internal corruption.9 Moreover, a second set of provisionally sanctioned motives has developed, those which can be conceptualized and enacted but must be masked by reference to fully sanctioned rhetoric. Thus, Ferdinand and the Cardinal cannot understand the Duchess, but they can legitimize their destruction of her through references to all the stock arguments against a widow’s remarriage, to notions of blood, honor, and duty, and to her “blasphemy” in feigning a pilgrimage. The Duchess’s characteristic
response to this cultural narrowing of possibilities can be seen in her wedding ceremony.\(^{10}\) Caught in a society which excessively constrains marriage within a variety of cultural prescriptions and proscriptions, a society which elaborates ceremonial form at the expense of spiritual content, the Duchess simplifies the marriage ritual and returns it to its essence—the union of a man and woman before God. The Cardinal and the Duke, in their emphasis on rank, discretion, and lust (I.i.292–328), desacramentalize the act of marriage; the Duchess in her simplicity and love reinvests it with sacramental meaning. To do so, she must cut through the obscuring mist of her culture’s rhetoric and the attitudes it represents, a mist that continually hovers between the characters and any possibility of authentic, considered actions, a mist that only the Duchess consistently sees through.

This role of cultural rhetoric has produced discomfort in the play’s critics. Webster’s detractors are fond of attacking the sententiae with which The Duchess of Malfi is riddled. His apparent habit of writing with his commonplace book at hand is alleged to have led Webster to incorporate undigested chunks of conventional wisdom into his plays. Thus there often seems to be in The Duchess of Malfi a tension between hollow aphorisms and haunting poetry. Certainly, the Duchess’ delivery of a beast fable when she is taken prisoner or the Duke’s deflection from his rage into an allegory on reputation seems discordant. Although I cannot defend without reservation Webster’s strange addiction to interrupting the poetic flow of his drama with tangential bits of oratory, these capsules of conventional wisdom are often dramatically pertinent. Some, like Bosola’s attack on makeup, are thematically relevant, but more significantly Webster’s employment of cultural rhetoric’s commonplaces supplies a barren ground against which the Duchess’ vital figure is placed, thereby intensifying our recognition of her as exceptional. Static protagonist drama frequently provides one or more characters to serve as the voice of generally impeccable but specifically ineffectual wisdom. This conventional wisdom is not right or wrong; rather, it is irrelevant to the tragic protagonist and his situation. In Prometheus Bound, for example, Ocean offers the advice of common sense to the uncommon hero. More treacherous, and more resembling the Arragonian brothers, the Knights in Murder in the Cathedral justify their murder of Becket in the disciplined and dispassionate tones of official cliché.

There is a further artistic relevance to the sententious passages in The Duchess of Malfi. If one steps back far enough from the play to visualize these passages not in their details but as part of a pattern of fluctuations between pat set pieces and poetic vision,
the texture of the play becomes an emblem of the action. The conventional passages can be felt as a prosaic thicket—or fog—through which the poetry must wind its way. If a reader or playgoer sometimes feels frustrated by apparently irrelevant sententious interruptions, that frustration mirrors the experience of the Duchess who must make her way through a world inimical to her integrity, a world whose standards are irrelevant to her, a world that succeeds in killing but not in destroying her. (The echo scene is not gratuitous; the Duchess figuratively as well as literally haunts the fifth act.) And Bosola, too, whom Antonio calls a mole, must burrow a tortuous path through a hostile and darkened world.

The dramaturgical relationship between Bosola, Ferdinand’s spy, and the Duchess is both complex in its significance and crucial to Webster’s portrayal of his static protagonist. Those who seek to find fault with Webster’s play accuse him of clumsy construction in placing the death of his heroine at the end of the fourth act, and his defenders can answer this charge by arguing that the play is, or partly is, Bosola’s tragedy. I cannot agree with them, however. The fifth act is needed to validate the sacrifice of the Duchess, to affirm that her death has not been wholly in vain. As Nigel Alexander observes, “When she is dead it emerges that she has in fact changed the course of the action.”11 More than this, Act V testifies, explicitly and implicitly, to her integrity and its abiding value in a hostile, mist-filled world. And, ironically enough, the chief witness for this value is Bosola, the Duchess’ executioner.

Throughout the first four acts, Bosola rails with the voice of moral outrage while consistently collaborating in his own corruption. Were I to write The Boyhoods of Webster’s Villains, I would portray the young preplay Bosola as a passionate idealist suddenly confronted with the fact of evil and corruption, one for whom, in his adolescent perspective of all - or - nothing, the existence of evil precludes the possibility of good. There is a side to Bosola, however, that withholds its full assent from his cynicism. In the apparent absence of a valid morality, he seizes upon “service” as the route to success, and “doing ill well” becomes his chief value. As Ralph Berry remarks, Bosola’s role as intelligencer “may be regarded in part as a quest for personal identity.”12 Certainly Bosola resembles the Duchess in that once he has made his decision, he persistently embodies its implications in his actions—the very wrongness of his decision emphasizing the rightness of hers. There is something chilling in Bosola’s painstaking and conscientious adherence to his “duty” as the Duke’s agent, but there is also some-
thing pathetic in his surprise at the Duke’s rejection of him after the Duchess’ murder:

I serv’d your tyranny; and rather strove  
To satisfy yourself, than all the world;  
And though I loath’d the evil, yet I loved  
You that did counsel it; and rather sought  
To appear a true servant, than an honest man.

(IV.ii.329–33)

Bosola has long known that the only “reward / Of doing well, is the doing of it” (I.i.31–32), but he has been slow to learn that doing evil, too, may be its own and only reward. Bosola has previously shown pity, even admiration, for the woman he murders, but only when the one value by which he has defined himself is shattered is he truly free to recognize her worth and its implications for him. C. G. Thayer observes that what Bosola learns is “that in an evil universe one must not only see himself: one must be himself.” Thus Bosola, as well as validating the Duchess’ integrity through his response to her, can be seen as, in some ways, her counterpart. Through the character of the Duchess, Webster affirms the potential of self-definition; in Bosola, he portrays a gradual and contorted progress toward the actualization of that potential.

A normative, critical expectation of change in a protagonist probably accounts for the frequent attempts to see Bosola as the central figure in *The Duchess of Malfi*; Bosola develops through the course of the play while the Duchess is of necessity essentially static. I would argue, however, that Bosola is not the play’s protagonist; rather, he is the audience’s mediator in the play. We watch Bosola learn what we must learn. Bosola’s real task in the play is to learn to see the Duchess, to understand the meaning of her integrity. Early in the play, Bosola says, “I look no higher than I can reach” (II.i.88–89), and Antonio replies, “You would look up to heaven, but I think / The devil, that rules i’ th’ air, stands in your light” (I.i.945). Antonio speaks truer than he knows; D. C. Gunby has argued persuasively that the Arragonian brothers are portrayed as explicitly diabolic, and they indeed stand between Bosola and his perception of the Duchess’ radiant integrity. As noted earlier, Bosola’s respect for his prisoner grows throughout Act IV, yet he cannot understand her as long as his first loyalty is to Ferdinand. Despite Bosola’s growing sympathy for the Duchess, he misinterprets her assertion that she is “Duchess of Malfi still” (IV.ii.142), thinking she refers to her temporal position rather than to her
deepest identity, of which her title is only a portion. He answers her:

That makes thy sleep so broken;
Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright,
But look'd to near, have neither heat, nor light.

(IV.ii.143-45)

Bosola has yet to learn that the Duchess' light is not the false light of the glowworm. It is in this scene that Bosola most clearly mediates between the audience and the role of the Duchess. At this point in the play, our affection for the Duchess and pity for her predicament is likely to tempt us to question whether her adherence to a self-defined integrity has been worth this suffering. But her withstanding of Bosola's repeated challenges to that integrity, challenges that may well echo our own, reaffirms our sense of its authenticity and value. We are thus ready to assent when, after Bosola is awakened to the Duchess' worth, he says:

Return, fair soul, from darkness, and lead mine
Out of this sensible hell:—she's warm, she breathes:—
... Her eye opes,
And heaven in it seems to ope, that late was shut,
To take me up to mercy.

(IV.ii.342-43; 347-49)

Bosola, moreover, in his appearances with a dark lantern, provides an emblematic summary of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The first time we see him skulking through the darkness carrying a dark lantern, he discovers the horoscope but cannot understand it as Antonio and the Duchess' attempt to wed their son to the cosmos. For Bosola the horoscope is merely evidence of the Duchess' lust. The characters in this play operate in a metaphorical darkness; what light they have is like that of the dark lantern, almost obliterated. But when in Act V we see Bosola once more carrying a dark lantern, the image's symbolic resonance has been partially transvalued. Bosola still moves through darkness—the world has not changed—and the tiny pool of light that was sufficient to permit his discovery of the horoscope is insufficient to prevent his murder of Antonio. But the cynical Bosola has found a purpose worth dying for, and he slowly follows a patch of light toward his revenge. Bosola may be damned, but at least he has learned to "be [his] own example" (V. iv. 82). And he has learned
this central lesson by slowly bringing his moral perceptions into harmony with those of the Duchess.

Webster expects his audience to learn what Bosola learns, and in much the same way. Webster places at the center of his play a static character, and in our experience of the Duchess, it is we, not she, who must change; we, not she, of whom moral growth is demanded. The Duchess begins with a moral poise, an integrity which cannot, should not, be radically altered according to external circumstances. Rather, her unchanging nature is unfolded before us, as again and again she successfully resists the encroachments of the world on her self-defined integrity. She does not change, but we must readjust our perceptions to bring them into congruence with the dramatic manifestations of her integrity. Thus, although the Duchess is a static character, our response to her—when we are sufficiently attentive to the witness she bears—is profoundly dynamic. Throughout The Duchess of Malfi, the playwright modulates his complex metaphor of obstruction and reflection, guiding his audience to an understanding of the nature, value, and precariousness of integrity. Through our experience of the play, if we are attentive to its demands on us, we become qualified to understand it. Like Bosola, we learn what the unchanging Duchess has always known: "Integrity of life is fame's best friend, / Which nobly beyond death, shall crown the end."

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Notes


7. "The Moral Paradox of Webster's Tragedy," PMLA, 90 (Oct. 1975), 899. Joyce Peterson, in her recent Curs'd Example: "The Duchess of Malfi" and Commonweal Tragedy (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1978), makes a related argument. She defines the play as "commonweal tragedy" wherein the good of the commonweal is the dominant normative value. Webster's judgment of the Duchess is negative and ironic (because she pursues her private desires to the detriment of her public responsibilities). Peterson and I share the assumption that the play is grounded in a tension between public and private values. We differ on which is corrupting which. I believe the public world of the play is demonstrably and insistently rotten before the Duchess' private self-assertion and that it is this very rottenness that necessitates her insistence upon personal integrity and gives it meaning.
9. The numerous image patterns that suggest hidden corruption have been discussed by Hereward T. Price, "The Function of Imagery in Webster," PMLA, 70 (Sept. 1955), 717-39, and by Berry, pp. 114-121.
10. James L. Calderwood, "The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony," Essays in Criticism, 12 (1962), 133-47, presents a very different view of this and other ceremonies in the play, arguing that the Duchess violates the concept of degree. I disagree with him for much the same reasons I disagree with Whitman's more recent essay.