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Visual violence in John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi

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If John Webster deserves high praise for The Duchess of Malfi, the play has nevertheless often met with disapproval, and, as day follows night, so, too, has critical disparagement of Webster as a dramatist. For example, Christopher Ricks reminds us of George Bernard Shaw’s view on Webster’s play: “For [George Bernard Shaw], Webster is ‘the Tussaud laureate’ not just because he offers in effect a Chamber of Horrors, and not just because he actually makes use of waxworks (The Duchess of Malfi Act 4, Scene 1), but because his creations are as lifeless and unconvincing as waxworks” (315 n.).1 Ricks essentially adopts Shaw’s assessment, devoting a chapter on Webster in his English Drama to 1710 to expand on Shaw’s view and picturing Webster as virtually pathological in his emphasis on violent representation, but a careful reading and contextualizing of Webster’s drama will show that his supposed obsession with violence does not produce lifeless, unconvincing, or “waxworks” creations. Indeed, Ricks’s and Shaw’s critical judgment founders upon an obvious contradiction: they state that Webster’s creations produce horror, yet are at the same time lifeless or akin to a waxwork. Moreover, Webster’s “Chamber of Horrors” would not have shocked an audience familiar with Jacobean theater, and by examining specific historical contexts that informed Webster’s representation of violence, this article will show that his work cannot be categorized as the outpourings of a diseased, perverse mind.

Webster wrote dramas in a historical period in which murderous revenge off-stage was hardly an uncommon event: revenge, as Sir Francis Bacon categorised it, as a form of “wild justice” (13), informed the emotional experience of spectators who attended a theater to witness revenge drama. Their willingness to pay scarce money to watch Webster’s play indicates that his approach to characterization in The Duchess of Malfi produced dramatic creations that were convincing and true to life for members of his audience: their fascination with Webster’s play undermines Shaw’s and Ricks’s judgment that Webster encoded his characters according to a false psychology, making them appear as lifeless as a waxwork. Specifically, then, I will contextualize Webster’s use of both physical and verbal violence in his play as entirely correspondent with the general experiences of the Jacobean audience, particularly in terms of how they experienced the complex emotional nexus of religion, crime, and punishment. Evidence from visual culture indicates the presence and centrality of graphic violence in normal life—violence that relates directly to a range of gruesome religious punishments for venal and blasphemous crimes. To establish this context of violence, we need to appreciate the heightened conflict between Catholics and Protestants and how this intense dispute inspired the dramatic material that contemporary playwrights reproduced and represented.

In brief, England pre–Martin Luther was a reasonably stable Catholic country, but King Henry VIII’s creation of the Protestant Church of England in 1536 produced the conditions for instability and conflict in English society. Over a period of about fifty years, the country faced a major struggle between the two Christian faiths until Elizabeth I became Queen of England in 1558 and created a Protestantism that combined specific Catholic beliefs as part of the new Church. When Elizabeth I died in 1603 and James I became King of England, the religious issues became more pronounced, especially given the rise of militant Puritanism. The most obvious issue was whether England would remain a Protestant country, or whether James would enact new laws regarding religious observances. These religious conflicts undoubtedly impacted Webster’s creativity, The Duchess of Malfi being written around 1612–1613 and first performed in 1614. Most obviously, the persecution of
crimes and punishments played a significant role in Webster’s storytelling: typically, denying that the king or queen was the head of the Church of England, practicing the Catholic Mass, or absence from Church of England services led to serious punishments. Religious crimes resulted in punishment by death in the form of burning, hanging, and being drawn and quartered. To remind the congregation of the dangers of blasphemy or heresy, church authorities made use of graphic illustrations to emphasize the nature of these punishments, as we see in Figure 1.

The figure depicts the horrific, bloody, and gruesomely inventive punishments that supposedly non-“Christians” suffered for offenses such as blasphemy, fornication, poisoning, and treason. Beneath each individual image, moreover, a caption records the punishment: for example, the searing of women’s breasts, roasting Christians and pouring vinegar and salt over their member, and tongues being cut out. Perhaps these punishments, even as they served as dire warnings for transgressions, also functioned as a form of shared entertainment for the pious spectator.

Admittedly, ascertaining whether or not any Elizabethan or Jacobean playgoer would be familiar with these types of print images remains a difficult task. Indeed, in Social Authorship and the Advent of Print Margaret Ezell warns against any overestimate of the extent to which the print trade in Elizabethan and early Stuart England could saturate the market, noting that print output was limited by between fifty and sixty machines. Clearly, Ezell’s data indicates that only a small number of consumers of print culture existed in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century: with only around fifty and sixty printing presses available, a limited number of publications were printed, a proportion of which would never have been offered for public sale. Hence, few Elizabethan and Jacobean citizens would be likely to witness these graphic illustrations. Moreover, print was expensive, as Joad Raymond details in his chapter on the popularity of print culture:

Print was a luxury commodity. Print was not produced by the people: for the most part it was produced by particular interest-groups within the people. Even if the compositors and press-operators, the hawkers and street-
pedlars who sold small books, and a handful of authors from humble backgrounds—even if these participants in the production of cheap print can be said to come from the people, printing was a capital-intensive business, and few early modern books can be said in this sense to represent a popular voice. Print was expensive. (4)

The fact that print items were expensive, though, does not tell the whole story of whether or not playgoers at a Webster production would be unfamiliar with the nature, scope, and religious context of the violent language used in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Violence that was condoned by religious doctrine and practice was, after all, a common feature of everyday life. What the prints tell us, in fact, is that acceptance of this violence permeated all levels of society. If print was, as Ezell and Raymond state, an expensive commodity, then we need to determine which social class attended the theater to watch Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. In Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576–1980, Griswold informs us that “persons of social and economic privilege, with both money and leisure time in the afternoon, dominated the theater-going public and exerted a major influence on playwrights” (29 n.). Griswold also reflects on the history of revenge tragedy by stating that it was “originally crafted for the public theater,” but that “after 1609 the public/private theater relationship changed […] the social gap between the public and private theater audiences grew wider and perpetuated itself. The Red Bull and the Fortune became infamous for catering to the vulgar, while the elite frequented the private theatres such as Blackfriars or the Phoenix” (67–68 n.). Moreover, as Clark found, *The Duchess of Malfi* was first performed privately in Blackfriars, and an elite audience would therefore have been in attendance (12 n.). Arguably, we can assume that at least some Jacobean playgoers could have been familiar with the type of prints referenced in this article either because they could afford them or because they knew them through access at viewings in private homes. More to the point, this privileged audience at Blackfriars would not be unduly shocked at gruesome language and bloody scenes. Webster’s performative mode of representation—the combination of action and dialogue, of physical imagery reproduced in deed and in imagery articulated through speech—duplicates the combined media of experience that informed how members of the audience conceptualized and understood the types and aims of violence in their time. The power of Webster’s drama resides precisely in its ability to construct representations that for his audience constituted common features of everyday life. As we will see, Webster fashions a world in which violence reflects the range of modes of representation found in the life of his audience.

In order to appreciate the historical context of dramatic violence, this article will additionally explore an example of late medieval drama, *Mankind*, to emphasize the continuity of violence in the theatrical traditions inherited by Webster. An examination of a morality play shows how audience members were, as G. A. Lester argues, “unwittingly” (xxi) encouraged to join in with the festivities occurring on the stage. Clearly, the modern reader needs to gain a degree of knowledge about these traditions of violence—in particular, the often graphic depictions of the violence that Christ suffered—in medieval morality plays in order to understand and appreciate the types and degrees of violence regularly represented in Webster’s works, particularly the history of the advancement of capital punishment through to the Renaissance. In fact, by focusing on the context of Webster’s representation of visual violence in *The Duchess of Malfi*, we can establish that Webster’s use of violence was neither peculiar nor pathological. As well, reflection on other contemporary playwrights and texts—after all, Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights often worked collaboratively, which led to recurrent themes—indicates that if Webster was supposedly perverse, then so were all of his contemporaries, a point ignored by Shaw, Ricks, and any other reader who deems *The Duchess of Malfi* the product of a diseased mind.

In Lester’s introduction of *Mankind* (ca. 1464–71³), he assesses the conflicting views on the text and concludes that *Mankind* “has been dismissed as ignorant, corrupt and probably degenerate […] and a sham morality” (xxi n.). More careful research into the context and reception of the play indicates that its values have been overlooked, with Lester stating that “*Mankind* relies heavily upon bawdy humor and violent action to make its moral point” (xxi n.). Indeed, the anonymously written play is full of violence, and its introduction of the three worldly vices exhibits the “violent action.” Newguise tells Nowadays to “Lay on with thy baleys till his belly brest” (l. 73), and he responds with “I put case I break my neck—how then?” (l. 74). Here, Newguise is whipping Nowadays with a
“baley” to make him dance until his belly bursts. Additionally, Newguise states that he “give[s] no force” (l. 75) whether or not Nowadays breaks his neck, a casual statement that underlines how sinfulness leads inevitably to a lack of Christian compassion. Later in the scene, the three vices extend their physical abuse to Mercy, indicated by Nought’s line: “Lo, take you here a trippet” (Mankind l. 113). Lester comments on this abuse by explaining that “the three worldly vices […] extend the mockery of Mercy to physical abuse, and by the time they swagger off, singing, they have provided Mercy with a vivid exemplum and the audience with a taste of the struggle which is about to be enacted” (xxi n.). Before the entry of Newguise, Nought, and Nowadays, Mercy is addressing the audience in a sermon-like fashion with an emphasis on Christ’s crucifixion, which Lester describes as “the foundation of mercy in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross” (xx n.). Thus the morality traditions developed a dramatic model for both dramatizing and discriminating violence to illuminate the proper attitude toward religious doctrine, and Webster and his contemporaries could find inspiration in this popular model for exploring violence in their revenge dramas.

Additionally, the three worldly vices, who are representations of temptations toward sin and away from God, push Mankind to physical violence. Mankind says later in the play:

Go and do your labor - God let you never thee! -
Or with my spade I shall you ding, by the holy Trinity!
Have ye none other man to mock, but ever me?
Ye would have me of your set.
Hie you forth lively, for hence I will you drive!
Newguise: Alas, my jewels!4 (Mankind, ll. 375–81 n.)

Here, Mankind is trying to push the vices to hard work, endorsing the idea, of course, that “the devil finds work for idle hands” and insinuating that Mankind knows that he must work in order to repress the devil and the three vices. Similarly, Lester connects Mankind, the “ordinary farmer,” to “a symbol of honest toil” (xxiv n.). He notes that

In [Mankind’s] simple endeavours to serve God through labor he calls to mind the archetypal Christian, Piers Plowman, and through the symbolism of his spade and his opening allusions to earth and clay he reminds us of Adam and of man’s burden of original sin. The farming context gives point to several references to the corn which will be saved and the chaff which will be burnt (lines 43, 50, 54–63, 180, 185), and it is these which bring us back to the question of language: idle words are the chaff which at the Last Judgement will cause their users to be cast into the fire of hell. (xxiv n.)

In short, Mankind’s characterization echoes with themes that run through Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi such as the imagery of fire and burning, of heaven and hell, and the Duchess’s desire to be a symbol of hope among her sadistic, evil brothers.

In light of how Mankind manages its characters, it is significant that Webster’s representation of violence in The Duchess of Malfi generally occurs primarily through the character of Ferdinand (though other characters clearly exhibit violent conduct and language). For example, when in 2.5 Ferdinand has discovered that the Duchess, his twin sister, is pregnant with a bastard child, both he and the Cardinal believe that their blood is tainted because of their sister’s “waste of her honours” (2.5.20–21). When the Cardinal asks if “our blood/The royal blood of Aragon and Castile,/Be thus attainted?” Ferdinand replies, “Apply desperate physic!/We must not now use balsamum, but fire,/The smarting cupping glass, for that’s the mean/To purge infected blood, such blood as hers.” (2.5.21–26). Throughout the play, Webster juxtaposes Ferdinand with fire, suggesting a possible connection between the desperate physic, the devil, and the fires of hell. Here, Ferdinand advises cupping to draw the Duchess’s humors into balance, a process that involved burning the cupping glass, which is attached to the patient’s body.5 If his language reveals his sadism and spite, we should acknowledge that when Webster represents the degree of gratification that Ferdinand expresses at the level of pain produced by the cupping, it also mirrors a similar form of gratification for a believer witnessing the punishment of the sinful. It is this gratification that Mulryne finds so terrifying in Ferdinand’s speech: “Even when Webster seeks to follow his characters over the borderline between
the normal and the insane his touch is unfaltering. There are few lines in drama as starkly terrifying as that out in Ferdinand’s mouth” (224–25 n.). Mulryne senses that Webster’s psychological understanding of Ferdinand’s characterization is accurate. Ferdinand’s speeches portray him as insane, to be sure, and it could be the consequence of his overactive imagination—his speeches do shift from verse to prose, a technique popular with Renaissance playwrights to show madness in a character. At the same time, the audience would recognize that Ferdinand expresses their culture’s common view on the need for violent punishment of sin for anyone guilty of a religious crime.

Later in the scene, Ferdinand extends the fire imagery by describing different methods in which he would like to torture and, potentially, murder his sister:

I would have their bodies
Burnt in a coal-pit with the ventage 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. (2.5.87–92)

Webster did not simply concoct this bloodthirsty image of the violence that Ferdinand wants to perform on the Duchess and Antonio. His speech, in fact, depicts three methods of brutal torture and murder, two of which we know from historical sources were actual punishments meted out during the late medieval and early modern period, as Figure 2 shows.

We can understand why Webster includes these various ideas for torture if we examine more carefully Figure 2, since it can provide useful evidence for understanding medieval and early modern torture and execution methods. Figure 2 shows numerous torture and murder executions: at the forefront (A), there are three men being burned in lead—“plumbo”; B shows a man who is tied up and has arrows directed at his naked body; C illustrates many Christians being attacked by wild animals; D lists eight names of men and others who have been killed; and E displays an army of men. Webster translates this type of visual representation into a recognizable element in Ferdinand’s characterization and, in doing so, illuminates a dubious feature of his culture’s relation to violence. Ferdinand is not simply explaining that he would like to murder his sister and her lover by stabbing them, nor do the vivid, barbaric methods show that his mind is deranged because he wants to wrap them in sheets and set them on fire; rather, Webster’s listing of Ferdinand’s plans for revenge not only emphasize both his murderous and cunning mind but also illuminate his rising excitement and pleasure at each additional method of torture and murder. Thus in the same way that Jacobean Protestants found pleasure in watching Catholics receive their just punishments, as demonstrated in Figure 2 (from Martyrium supplicia), it would hardly be surprising to find that a contemporary playgoer similarly enjoyed Ferdinand’s plots for meting out punishment to the sinful Duchess. In providing his audience with a situation entirely familiar to them, Webster’s creation can hardly be deemed pathological in intention, which is what critics such as Shaw and Ricks contend.

Indeed, the method of burning as a form of punishment was a particularly religious mode of punishment, as Lewis Lyons in The History of Punishment affirms:

By the reign of Henry VIII hanging was back, along with other methods including burning, boiling, and quartering. […] Burning was one of the most common execution methods used by the Romans to kill Christians. […] In England, both Catholics and Protestants were burned at various times, and witches were fanatically hunted down and burned in England, Germany and throughout the rest of Europe. In a five-year period, first Catholics, then Protestants, then again Catholics were burned at the stake in England. After Henry VIII broke with Rome, he had Catholics burned as heretics. His daughter Mary (r. 1553–58) came to the throne after the death of her brother Edward VI. A devout Catholic, Mary married Philip II of Spain and embarked on a series of religious persecutions of Protestants. During her brief five-year reign, she burned some 300 Protestants, including rich and poor men, women, and even children, earning her the name “Bloody Mary”. Mary died childless and the throne passed to her Protestant sister, Elizabeth I, when Catholics were burned once again. (157–61 n.)
Although both Protestants and Catholics were persecuted, both religious beliefs found burning a popular method of punishment. In other words, Ferdinand’s desire to burn the Duchess’s and Antonio’s bodies in the three different ways aptly mirrors a choice of torture common in Webster’s age.

In Figure 2, one of the captions states that “multi Christianos feris obij ciuntur.” Christians is the vital word, indicating that Webster’s imagery in *The Duchess of Malfi* is grounded in the cultural milieu of his time. Indeed, besides Ferdinand’s repetitive allusion to fire in his tirades (“Thine? Thy heart?/What should I name’t, unless a hollow bullet/Filled with unquenchable wildfire?” (3.2.114–15)), the Duchess also includes similar imagery in her speeches:
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;
I am acquainted with sad misery
As the tanned galley-slave is with his oar. (4.2.23–28)

Here, the Duchess echoes Deuteronomy 28.23: “Heaven, that is above thee, be it brazen; and the earth, that thou tredast on, be it iron.” John Russell Brown notes that the Duchess refers to a biblical curse in the Old Testament, underlining that Webster encodes religious imagery into the forms of punishments in his play. Interestingly, “sulphur,” which is associated with Hell, replaces “iron,” and Brown demonstrates the common appreciation of this relationship by citing King Lear where Lear says: “There’s hell, there’s darkness, there’s the sulfurous pit—burning, scalding, stench, consumption!” (140 n.). In other words, Elizabethans and Jacobins feared for their afterlife, particularly when England converted to Protestantism because of its eradication of purgatory. Even so, Webster’s audience would not likely have flinched at Ferdinand’s speeches condemning the Duchess to hell since the Duchess is committing sin in the eyes of a contemporary audience.

Tellingly, we find Bibles including illustrations that depict heaven and hell, the devil, and all of his evil creatures. Clearly, publishers felt that it was part of the accepted function of religious propaganda to frighten the believer, as we see in Figure 3.

Arguably, then, Elizabethan and Jacobean views about the necessity for violent punishments derived from the Bible: usually associated with Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, they assert a profound connection between religion and punishment. Following the traditions of medieval iconography, which emphasized Christ’s death on the cross, his crucifixion inspired contemporary playwrights, particularly Thomas Kyd. The Spanish Tragedy, written during Elizabeth’s reign, reverberates with biblical references, predominantly through the character of Horatio, who was murdered and hung from an arbor: an archetypal image of Christ on the cross. Similarly, in Mankind, Mercy symbolizes Christ, not only in the delivery of his sermons but also at the end of the play when Mankind is about to hang himself and Mercy enters with a whip. The image mirrors the biblical story of Jesus entering the temple with a whip made of cords, driving out the wrongdoers. In the morality play, Mercy chases away the three vices and Mischief, who declares: “Help thyself, Nought! Lo, Mercy is here! He scareth us with a baleys; we may no long tarry!” (Mankind, ll. 805 n.). Importantly, Figure 3 shows a man being hung in a Christ-like manner, underlining that ideas of punishment went hand in hand with the Bible.

During the Middle Ages, it was believed that the punishment fit the crime, an idea that persisted through to the Renaissance. As Wolfgang observes:

Typical corporal punishments of the Middle Ages were static in nature. When a man’s hands were cut off for forgery or stealing, his tongue removed for blasphemy, or his eyes gouged out for spying, there was an irrevocable “poetic” or symbolic punishment inflicted on the offender—a punishment that was static and constant both in the form it took on the person and in its meaningful nexus to the crime. (579 n.)

While Wolfgang’s study accounts for the persistence of the view that violent punishment for sin was appropriate, it is significant for understanding Webster’s play that a crime could be dismissed if a person declared benefit of the clergy: that is, if a person could recite a text from the Bible, they were free from punishment: “All an accused man had to do was prove that he could read a passage from the Bible […] If he could do this he would be granted benefit of clergy” (62 n.). After the 1500s, moreover, a range of crimes were becoming “nonclergyable,” and by the time of Elizabeth’s reign “the rule forbidding benefit of clergy to second offenders was not being applied” (62 n.). A similar defense was called “benefit of the belly,” a defense that meant that a woman who could declare her pregnancy could escape punishment until the baby was born. In fact, “such records as we have suggest that, in most cases, the respite was treated as tantamount to a pardon and no execution would take place” (63 n.). Benefit of the belly is crucial in Webster’s play because the Duchess should have been granted that benefit. Her
brother, contrary to the audience’s expectations, refuses to spare her—or the child. Bosola admits that he “observes [his] duchess/Is sick a-days, she pukes, her stomach seethes” (2.1.60–61), and soon after confirms that he has “bought some apricocks/The first our spring yields” (2.1.66–67). Bosola recognizes that the Duchess is experiencing morning sickness, and his mention of “apricocks” is a reference to a Renaissance belief that apricots were supposedly taken to induce labor in pregnant women. The Duchess later proclaims that “[t]his green fruit: and my stomach are not friends” (2.1.158), and then Antonio declares that “she’s fall’n in labor and there’s left/No time for her remove” (2.1.165).

Figure 3. “Bonorum Labor Gloriosus est Fructus Sapient” (SBA:600). Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.
Knowing the policy of benefit of the belly, contemporary audiences would have judged Ferdinand’s actions as scandalous because even if the Duchess’s pregnancy was unlawful, Ferdinand knows that he must wait for her baby to be born before he can punish her. Arguably, then, Ferdinand’s characterization, if seemingly exaggerated and unbelievably villainous, illuminates the reality of the violence of punishments authorized by religious doctrine. Thus if Ferdinand’s character appears psychologically untrue to critics such as Shaw and Ricks, he is nonetheless true to the psychological understanding and sentiments rooted in the religious ideologies current in Webster’s time.

Webster’s visual aptitude for creating violent language and action in The Duchess of Malfi refutes Ricks’s and Shaw’s view that his creations are lifeless and unconvincing. Through Webster’s understanding of England’s religious discourse and its psychological complexities, contemporary audiences would have been aware of the depiction of Ferdinand as the devil and would have experienced the paradox that it is his character who condemns the Duchess because of her bastard sin. If Ferdinand’s sadistic speeches shock a twenty-first century audience, Webster’s contemporaneous audience may have been both scandalized at her sin and relished the thought of her punishment. At the end of the play, moreover, the Duchess’s martyrdom would have been recognized by some of the contemporary audience since Catholics were refusing to deny their religion and were prepared to die for their beliefs. Therefore, Webster’s representation of religious conflicts and punishments mirrors life in Jacobean England: historical context teaches us that violent punishments were common for people who disobeyed religious laws; in such a social context, an audience would not experience visual violence, whether verbal or physical, as a source of shock when it was performed on the Jacobean stage. Additionally, Webster’s decision to represent the Duchess as pregnant clearly indicates his extensive knowledge on the punishments and pardons in the English milieu of his time—as the visual evidence provided in this study shows. While Shaw and Ricks discriminate against Webster’s creation in a way similar to the early critical views about Mankind, Ricks actually provides us with an apt summation of Webster’s achievement: “In the greatest literature there is a marriage of those true minds, imagination and observation—imagination not being allowed to lord it over observation, nor observation over imagination” (Ricks 316 n.). In The Duchess of Malfi, Webster gives us inventive imagination, sharp observation of the society around him, and a “true mind.”

Notes

1. In Our Theatres in the Nineties, Shaw wrote of “the opacity that prevented Webster, the Tussaud laureate, from appreciating his own stupidity” (334 n.).
2. For a full account of the print trade in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, see Ezell 87.
3. For a full explanation of Mankind’s dates, see Lester’s Introduction to Mankind, Everyman, Mundus et Infans.
4. Jewels means testicles, which is interesting because Webster also uses similar imagery in The Duchess of Malfi when the Duchess says: “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?” (4.2.208–10).
5. For a full discussion of “cupping” and other medical procedures, see Balizet 136.
6. In Hamlet (1604), we see Hamlet “put on antic disposition” (1.5.180 n.), and his speech alters between verse and prose so that he can “trick” others to believe that he has gone mad.

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