torture racks for the criminals, but to some extent such efforts are merely symbolic gestures; the scapegoat may be confined, the tumour excised, but the cancer is still whispering from cell to cell in the body politic. The mere fact that someone cruelly destroys a potentially happy marriage is sad, but not necessarily tragic. What gives *Othello* its magnificence is the immense beauty of its language and its passions; what gives the play its lasting penetration is the warning that there is an enemy lurking in human nature, in each of our human natures, waiting for a chance to rewrite the potential joyful comedy of life into a tragedy.

The Duchess of Malfi

The Duchess of Malfi (in Webster's version of the story) is a young widow who, despite the fervent warnings of her brothers (Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal), decides to remarry. She successfully conceals this remarriage until the malcontent Bosola, hired by the brothers to spy on her, discovers that she has borne a son. After two more children appear, Ferdinand furiously confronts the Duchess, but she conceals her husband Antonio's identity (especially necessary because he had been her lowly steward) and smuggles him out of Amalfi. Unfortunately, she confides her plans to Bosola, so the couple are separated, and Ferdinand and Bosola torment the imprisoned Duchess with a swarm of madmen, a dead man's hand supposedly belonging to Antonio, and a wax *tableau pas encore vivant* supposedly showing her slaughtered husband and children. Bosola then strangles her, but her noble defiance at the point of death, and the continuing failure of the brothers to reward his service, convince him that he should save Antonio. Ironically, in his first effort to strike down the Cardinal, Bosola accidentally kills the man he had come to save; he does finally kill the Cardinal, only to exchange fatal wounds with Ferdinand, whose guilt concerning the Duchess has driven him into a lycanthropic madness.

This plot, based on events that took place a century earlier in Italy, is clearly less important than the play's vivid characters and haunting atmosphere. The action is generated by the jealousy, greed, and pride of the brothers, but the tragedy is less concerned with evil than with corruption, with the struggle of Bosola to maintain his integrity. Bosola is a spiritual kinsman of Vindice: a malcontent revenger whose strong moral instincts have been perverted by the decadent court he inhabits. He leads the moralized parade of characters which (as in *The Revenger's Tragedy*) opens the play, where he is described as the conventional 'railing' satirist; and his first words, a complaint of official neglect, mark him as the conventional malcontent: 'I have done you better service than to be slighted thus' (1.1.24, 33). This might identify Bosola as

another Iago, a treacherously 'honest' Italian confidant of the passionate unlikely lovers at the heart of the story. Iago, however, is interesting because his evil is too fundamental to be changed, whereas Bosola is interesting because the nobility of the Duchess reawakens his bitterly repressed virtues.

If it were not for the Duchess herself, *The Duchess of Malfi* would end this triad of theodicean tragedies in the same ironic vein as the triad of revenge tragedies. Without her steadfastness and tenderness, this would be a play of irony and scorn like *The Revenger's Tragedy*, rather than (as it proves) of passion and sorrow. Like *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Duchess of Malfi* toys with the queasy humour of theatrical self-consciousness, as in Delio's remark on the passage of time between the second and third acts. More often, however, Webster uses metadrama for serious interrogations of identity and predestination. The Duchess tells Bosola, 'I account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will' (4.1.99–100). This is partly Stoicism – an essential component of most Renaissance tragic heroism – but it is also (as in *Hamlet*) a commentary on tragic human destiny. For her to carry her archaic virtues successfully to the Jacobean audience, she must redeem the genre of the play she inhabits from the satiric tragedy of decadence and horror envisioned by Bosola.[41]

Unfortunately, as many critics have complained,[42] *The Duchess of Malfi* does not end with the heroine's courageous death that closes the fourth act. She may be present in the wistful disembodied echo that subsequently tries to warn Antonio away from his doom, but that prophetic voice proves as futile as Cassandra's (5.3.21–54). She scores heroic victories against many of the villains of Jacobean culture – false pride of rank, greed for inheritances, religious doubt, political corruption, patriarchal tyranny – but her victories endure only within her subjectivity, which may itself be vulnerable to her death. The fact that Bosola inadvertently continues to do the work of evil when he tries to perform virtuous retribution suggests that this play-world suffers not from a few evil men or evil choices, but rather from a decadence so pervasive and an entropy so unprovidential that individual assertions count for little. The theodicy of *The Duchess of Malfi* thus becomes virtually the opposite of *Doctor Faustus*, where one person perversely rejected a Providential universe; now evil is a normative condition of civilization that only a heroic will can defy. As the decay of Elizabeth and the growth of

[41] Norman Rabkin characterizes this tragedy as predominantly satirical in the Introduction to his edition of *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of 'The Duchess of Malfi'* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 10; the volume contains many valuable essays and excerpts.

[42] See for example William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New* (New York, 1929), p. 60. For a contrary view, see Lee Bliss, *The World's Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1983), pp. 158–9.

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astronomy renew anxieties about mutability, and as Reformation theology commandeers popular consciousness, the notion that individual virtue can meaningfully affect destiny becomes enfeebled. This may help to explain the emergence of women as tragic protagonists: especially after the death of the Virgin Queen, male playwrights increasingly acknowledge this tragic deprivation of control as the normative condition of women. *The Duchess of Malfi* leaves us perplexed as to whether the heroine's long endurance is the redemptive truth of the tragedy, or whether the continuing descent into irony, error, and destruction in the final act proves that even such a magnificent embodiment of the old virtues cannot finally redeem a world – her Italian one or the author's Jacobean one – from a loss of meaning, an epidemic of moral as well as physical decay. She makes a good end and a beautiful corpse, but dying well may not be good enough.

Furthermore, her task as tragic protagonist is to escape precisely the grand scenes of ambition that Elizabethan tragic heroes pursued so avidly. All she seeks is happy domesticity with her accountant husband, and she faces assassination with pious acceptance and a last request that could hardly be more poignantly maternal, or further from questions of politics and revenge: 'I pray thee look thou givest my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / Say her prayers ere she sleep' (4.2.207–9). This subjugation of traditionally heroic values to bourgeois ones[43] may signal a growing Jacobean despair about the morality and manageability of the public sphere. The captured King Lear certainly seeks a comparably domestic refuge, forswearing all political involvement and begging permission merely to live in playful solitude with his daughter Cordelia.

In tragedy, some envious force on the fringe of the domestic paradise intervenes to subvert this familiar comic solution. *Othello* shifts suddenly and chillingly from the marriage celebration to the perspective of the villain; *The Duchess of Malfi* allows us our first glimpse inside the Duchess's happy household, only to confront us shockingly with its nemesis. As the Duchess banters with her husband and her serving-woman about sex, marriage, and grey hair, her companions sneak playfully out of the room, and she turns to find herself alone with her evil twin, the murderously jealous Ferdinand, who has overheard all this domestic prattle (3.2.1–79), and who will lie in ambush for years, if necessary, to reclaim her from her little world of bliss.

[43] Rabkin, *Interpretations*, p. 7, perceives a despondent Jacobean inversion of tragic values in this transformation of a great heroine into a 'good bourgeoise'; Bliss, *The World's Perspective*, pp. 144–6, 167–8, explicates this idea perceptively. But even Faustus and Macbeth express regret, in their final moments, that they did not settle for pleasant little dinner-parties with their friends.

The impulse to use Renaissance arts to build a new Eden always proves a dangerous delusion in drama, whether that paradise is envisioned with tragic grandeur as in *Doctor Faustus*, with satiric excess as in Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), or with a magical romantic aura as in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611). In these three cases one can blame the new Fall on vanity; the forgotten darker side of human nature (embodied by devils, cheaters, and savages respectively) exacts retribution. In the case of the Duchess's domestic retreat, however, the audience confronts the possibility that destruction needs no licence from sin, that a mutable indifferent world consumes each caring mortal creature, that (as Bosola says) 'We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and bandied / Which way please them' (5.4.63–4). By sustaining her faith, hope, and charity until her final belated breath, the Duchess of Malfi strives to forestall that recognition, but her end is not the play's end, and her last word – 'Mercy' – hardly characterizes the random carnage of the closing scenes.

In the world of *The Duchess of Malfi*, 'all things have their end' (5.3.18), and no one has control – an impression the abrupt shifts in Webster's dramaturgy serve to reinforce. The magnificent Duchess may conceal and protect her family for a while, but punishment is promised and eventually performed. The tough and crafty Bosola may scheme, but his deeds contradict his own wishes, and even his successes are without reward. Ferdinand makes hyperbolic efforts to forbid and penalize his sister's remarriage, but she promptly defies both his warnings and his tortures, and madness soon prevents him from controlling even himself. The Cardinal, the most detached and powerful manipulator, finds events fatally run away from him even among his family and his hirelings, and dies with the saddest, most defeated last words of all: 'And now, I pray, let me / Be laid by, and never thought of' (5.5.112–13). Even the Duchess's surviving young son, who (in a familiar tragic consolation) righteously assumes power at the end, already seems doomed to early, violent death by the horoscope made at his birth (2.3.72–80).

Though it is facile to schematize cultural shifts by quoting lines out of context, it is hard to mistake the profound collapse of optimism signalled by the change from Faustus's youthful exclamation, 'O what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, and omnipotence, / Is promised to the studious artisan' (1.1.80–2), to Bosola's dying question, 'In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness, / Doth womanish and fearful mankind live?' (5.5.125–6). Faustus fails, but he leaves us thinking about the human mind; Jacobean tragedy more often reverts to the medieval model by leaving the skull instead, with its mocking grin, as our dominant impression. In Jacobean playwrights, as in the Metaphysical poets of the same

era, the spiritual component of human experience struggles perpetually to avoid eclipse by the physical. Bosola associates his own corruption from a moral idealist into a Machiavellian pragmatist with the Renaissance fashion in painting that rejected the grand iconic style in favour of realistic reproduction of the lowliest things: 'Now for this act, I am certain to be rais'd, / And men that paint weeds to the life are prais'd' (3.2.378–9).

At the same time, however, Jacobean tragedy and Metaphysical poetry commonly strive to rescue individual experience and expression from absorption by the conventional. *The Duchess of Malfi* resonates this fundamental Renaissance ambivalence about the relative values of the abstract (which imposes impersonality, but may permit transcendence) and the empirical (which permits individual experience, but imposes the limits of physicality). T. S. Eliot remarks that 'The art of the Elizabethans is an impure art' because they sought 'to attain complete realism without surrendering any of the advantages which as artists they observed in unrealistic conventions'[44]; but contamination can sometimes be enrichment, and so it is in the case of Webster's dramaturgy.[45] Though many of the devices of plot and spectacle in *The Duchess of Malfi* are quite conventional, the powerful impression of doomed personality evoked by the fragments of Webster's poetry is not; once again the tragic hero inhabits a universe that constantly threatens to eradicate her individuality. The Duchess herself gratifyingly combines unrealistic extremes of conventional virtue with realistic bodily frailties, including impetuous appetites for food and sexual love; the plot of the play, concerning her doomed determination to obey her personal desires, is virtually inseparable from the tension inherent in the literary form itself. She is a heroic individual, a tautology in that Renaissance tragedy made individuality a precondition for heroism, an oxymoron in that conformity to a heroic role necessarily entails some surrender of individual traits, and loyalty to the heroic principles commonly leads to the obliteration of individual existence in death. Even the Duchess, who abjures traditional public heroism for the sake of private experience, must endure this bitter paradox.

So it is not surprising that the Renaissance tragic hero is so often shadowed by a negative image of individualism: the self-fashioned, self-conscious Machiavellian villain who coldly assumes that human identity has neither a stable core nor a meaningful connection to anything beyond itself. The brothers lure Bosola into this condition, and the Duchess retrieves him from

[44] T. S. Eliot, 'Four Elizabethan Dramatists' in *Selected Essays* (London, 1951 edn), pp. 114–16.
[45] Inga-Stina Ekeblad, 'The "impure art" of John Webster' in Rabkin, *Interpretations*, pp. 49–64, comments on the potential richness of such mixtures.

it by sustaining her virtues through the worst morbid and mordant scenarios he can cast her in. The fear and pity that the malcontent Bosola feels may therefore pass through him to the cynical audience of Jacobean tragedy. In the haunting *pas de deux* of the torture scene – a scene of modern absurdist, more than medieval macabre, terror – the archetypal confrontation between the heroic individual and the implacable, impersonal forces of the physical universe becomes starkly visible. Bosola comes to the Duchess aptly disguised as a tomb-maker and as the old bell-man who visits condemned prisoners; when her personal misery leads her to curse 'the world / To its first chaos', he tauntingly replies, 'Look you, the stars shine still' (4.1.118–20). Yet in the following scene, as Bosola relentlessly attacks her morale with his *memento mori* commonplaces, the Duchess replies defiantly, 'I am Duchess of Malfi still' (4.2.115–39). These counterpoised declarations are each manifestly true. Death (accelerated by the evils of pride, greed, and jealousy that propel the other tragedies of theodicy) does indeed destroy her, and the universe goes on. But she also retains her heroic integrity in the very face of death, forbids it to compromise the power of her will and the tenderness of her heart. Compelled to adjudicate this confrontation, the audience must internalize the tragic ambivalence, the choice between absorption in the determinate forces of decay, and futile rebellion on behalf of the human individual and her unfathomable capacity for love.

Conclusion

Ideally, the modern audience of Renaissance tragedy must remain simultaneously aware that the plays were created within a particular historical context, and that they may still bear on the audience's own world. A tragedy is a product of very specific issues in crisis at the time of its generation; continuities and analogies may also allow it to speak to persistent problems of human existence. The critical movement called New Historicism shares with old-fashioned historical criticism a tendency to isolate the plays as political artifacts and allegories: the old version tried to determine which courtiers are being praised or mocked in which characters, whereas the new one tries to determine which cultural orthodoxies and governmental powers are being implicitly endorsed or subverted, but the interpretive attitude is generally comparable.

Though such information is certainly useful, allowing it to estrange us from the implied psychological experience of the characters is wasteful, because there are at least two important ways of connecting the past with the present. The liberal-humanist viewpoint, which has been fundamental to most teaching of Renaissance tragedy (and may have been fundamental to the writing

of that tragedy as well),[46] suggests that canonical literature is the vessel by which eternal human truths and values are conveyed across time. Opposing this rather patrician and ahistorical model is a cultural-materialist approach that seeks in Renaissance tragedy the ancestry of modern radicalism,[47] a frequency-channel on which ideas that undermine the status quo and common wisdom of dominant Renaissance cultures (by exposing them as arbitrary) were already audible. The theatre is thus a place of subversion – though (some New Historicists now believe) a strategically isolated one, a dead virus used to inoculate the body politic against revolutionary tendencies.

Surely art does both things: preserves cultural values and tests their weaknesses. Surely there is validity in both the liberal-humanist fear of losing the past with its accreted moral wisdom, and the cultural-materialist fear of remaining inscribed in regressive values; there is virtue in both the traditional insistence that personal experience must not be obliterated by systematic political thinking, and the revolutionary warning that sentimental focus on the tragic individual conduces to quietism concerning the mechanisms of widespread social injustice. Circumventing the severe but literal-minded censorship of the Revels Office, Renaissance tragedy was often an expression of anarchical popular will and a cry of protest against the shared agonies of historical change, but it may not have its ultimate reference, or offer practical solutions, to specific political or economic problems, because it cannot isolate or erase the contradictions created by our cognitive failings, by our simultaneous co-operation and competition in the business of survival, by our mixed nature as mental and physical beings, or by our status as creatures aware of our ineluctable and imponderable mortality. These are not crises of an age, but for all time.

Still, the points of contestation in a late-twentieth-century intellectual community often diverge from those of Elizabethan culture, so modern students and theatre audiences may feel compelled to highlight and to challenge aspects of the plays that are likely to have been inactive ingredients to Elizabethan consumers. Some scholarship discerns tragedians who were prophetic, but necessarily covertly so, in challenging the humanistic presumptions, the class system, the gender discrimination, even the Christianity

[46] Hardin Craig, 'The shackling of accidents' in R. J. Kaufman, ed., *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1961), p. 24, argues that the Renaissance 'doctrine of imitation . . . rests ultimately upon the great doctrine of similitude. The Renaissance looked upon man as a universal being repeating in his life the deeds of all men . . . Men's actions are always alike because their natures are always the same.'

[47] See for examples the essays in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester, 1985), and John Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares* (London, 1985).

of their societies. Other scholarship assumes the tragedians were complacent or even propagandistic on these points,[48] and attacks them for that failing. Is *The Changeling* a proto-feminist play for showing its female protagonist destroyed because (like Gertrude in *Hamlet*) she has no imputed power except as an object of sexual and marital desire? Or a sexist play, for failing to focus our outrage on that aspect of her dilemma? Or an historical artifact to which modern feminist terminology cannot justly or productively be applied? Similar questions can of course be raised about racism in Marston's *Sophonisba*, anti-Semitism in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, or the class system in Fletcher's *Bonduca* (1611–14). The questions are impossible to answer, and well worth asking.

In fact, tragedy is a genre of unanswerable questions that are worth asking. Renaissance theatres were, as the authorities often suspected, the breeding-grounds of profoundly seditious conspiracies – not because the heroes advocated destruction of the social order, but because the tragic dilemmas of those heroes performed a kind of deconstruction on the limiting and contradictory aspects of the current vocabulary of belief. Every culture has lines of enquiry it must forbid in self-defence; the Renaissance strained the mechanisms of repression and diversion to their limits, and one result was a variety of great drama. When ideology loses its ability to explain away human suffering and mortality, what remains is a sympathetic recognition of our kinship with the victims. Tragic theatre is not only a precious institution for the negotiation of cultural change, it is also the supreme instrument for nurturing such sympathy. For most students and audiences the language of Renaissance tragedy must now be almost opaque, the conventions unfamiliar; yet something survives that makes the modern appreciation of these works more than merely archaeological. Is it really surprising that dramatic confrontations with jealousy, revenge, and mortality should exercise continuing power? No mystical theory of archetypes is required to justify the belief that human beings can recognize, learn from, and care about the suffering of even their distant kindred. This is not to exclude the diversity of human experience by sentimental appeal to an essentialist idea of human nature, but rather to acknowledge the force of shared recognitions when they are made available – and tragic theatre has long been the most compelling medium for the shared recognition of what many human beings, in their passions and their losses, have in common.

[48] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1943), has been the main target of revisionists seeking to liberate the plays from the hierarchical ideas of their time, or seeking to prove that those ideas were in fact the propaganda of the power élite rather than universal belief.