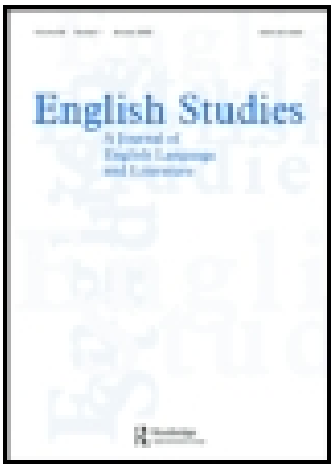

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The function of Bosola in the duchess of Malfi

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thongized ME *ūr* is first shown by the orthoepists in the seventeenth century and that it is only in this century that it becomes increasingly common. Shakespeare's contemporary Alexander Gil is one of the first to show it, but only sporadically. The evidence of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century orthoepists also shows that the diphthongization of ME *ū* before final *r* is the rule, whereas it commonly fails when ME *ū* is followed by *r* plus consonant.[36] Bearing all this in mind — as well as the fact that the raising of ME *o̤r* to lME *o̤r* was characteristic of vulgar speech, except in such common words as *more* — we may assume that Shakespeare used the normal unraised pronunciation in ME *o̤r* words, but that he also knew the raised one (identical with ME *o̤*), which was probably used in the rhymes *more:whore* (Troi. 4.1.65, 5.2.113), *whore:door:more:score* (Lear 1.4.137-40, the Fool's rhymed proverbs), and *floor:roar* (Dream 5.1.225). Further, that he used unmonophthongized ME *ou* in *four;*[37] unlowered ME *o̤r* in *floor* and *hoard;* diphthongized ME *ū* before final *r* (as in *flour*); and unlowered undiphthongized ME *ū* before *r* plus consonant (as in *mourn*).

Bergamo. FAUSTO CERCIGNANI.

The Function of Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*

It is not very surprising, considering the nobility and greatness of the duchess' character, to come upon speeches expressing her humility, charity, fortitude and patience. What does concern the reader are the utterances of a sinister figure such as Bosola, for throughout the course of the play he makes constant reference to good and evil and to the Christian framework within which men operate. For example, in IV, ii Bosola recognizes the evil he has participated in and reflects upon the consequences of sin:

> ... a guilty conscience
> Is a blacke Register, wherein is writ
> All our good deedes, and bad: a Perspective
> That showes us hell;[1]

And again in V, ii, after the cardinal attempts to cajole him into murdering Antonio, he decides upon a course of action which aligns him with the forces of good:

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[36] See Dobson, § 165.

[37] See my article 'ME *ou* in Shakespeare', *Studia Neophilologica*, 43 (1971), 435-45.

[1] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, lines 384-7. All quotations are taken from *The Complete Works of John Webster*, edited by F. L. Lucas (New York: O.U.P., 1937), Vol. II.

> The weakest Arme is strong enough, that strikes
> With the sword of Justice:
> (379-80)

Since these and other such speeches occur after he genuinely repents his crimes, they are entirely in character with the evil man turned good. However, when similar passages can be found before this reversal takes place, a discrepancy arises between the criminal psychology of Bosola and the sentiments which he speaks.

The critical problem raised by this character has provoked a variety of responses over the past decade or more. C. G. Thayer attempts to reconcile the discrepancy in Bosola by noting that he plays a role throughout the duchess' tragedy and then later acts according to his true nature when his own tragedy unfolds.[2] In his edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Gunnar Boklund accounts for his behavior in terms of a moral rationalizer whose primary concern is his own self-interest.[3] Irving Ribner, in *Jacobean Tragedy*, reconciles the ambiguity by seeing it as part of the pattern of the whole play, particularly in Bosola's relation with the duchess whom he prompts into asserting the dignity of human life.[4] Each of these critics implies in varying degree a moral vision which underlies Webster's drama. I propose to show that, far more than previous criticism has suggested, Webster was aware of a moral order to the extent that he allowed it to take precedence over his dramatic art.

Bosola's viciousness hardly needs to be recalled. In the opening scene Antonio catalogues the crimes which the malcontent would not hesitate to commit. Envy, pride, covetousness, lechery and murder, he says, are the capital sins Bosola publically rails against but would indeed embrace, 'If he had meanes to [do] so' (29). Delio's later assertion, 'I knew this fellow (seaven yeares) in the Gallies,/ For a notorious murther' (70-1), corroborates his friend's suspicions. Bosola's own conversation with the cardinal provides the most damning testimony of his spiritual depravity: '... miserable age, where onely the reward of doing well [namely, a murder], is the doing it!' (33-4). His callous malevolence is seen in action when Ferdinand hands him gold and Bosola, while accepting it, cynically asks, 'whose throat must I cut?' (266). Once his villainy is firmly established the reader is totally unprepared for the dialogue which immediately follows. After Ferdinand proposes that Bosola serve as intelligencer against the duchess, the arch-criminal draws back and retorts:

> Take your Divels,
> Which Hell calls Angels: these curs'd gifts would make
> You a corruptor, me an impudent traitor,
> And should I take these, they'll'd take me to hell.
> (285-8)

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[2] C. G. Thayer, 'The Ambiguity of Bosola', *Studies in Philology*, LIV (1957), 162-71.
[3] Gunnar Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1962), pp. 104, 106-7 143-4.
[4] Irving Ribner, *Jacobean Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1962), pp. 110-11.

It is unreasonable to believe that one who has committed murder in the past and who shows no compunction about repeating the act should scruple at the suggestion that he become a spy. Even if Ferdinand were already determined upon the kind of revenge he would execute against his sister when she remarries, and Bosola were aware of it, the speech would still ring false. As it is, though, he knows nothing of Ferdinand's intent and this renders his self-righteous indignation all the more incongruous. If this were the end of their dialogue it could be argued that Bosola, as a result of a perverted self-evaluation, believes himself above assuming the role of an 'impudent traitor'. However, as the men continue to debate Bosola reveals that he clearly recognizes what he is and what he is doing. After first rationalizing his acceptance of the position given him, he then comments objectively upon this rationalization, observing to the duke that, 'the Divell / Candies all sinnes o'er: and what Heaven termes vild,/ That names he complementall' (299-301). And as he leaves his interlocutor he makes the concluding observation: 'Let good men, for good deeds, covet good fame,/ Since place, and riches oft are bribed of shame —' (315-16). Robert Ornstein regards such moralizing to be hypocritical and asserts that it can be so barefaced because there is no effective moral order to oppose figures like Bosola.[5] Although this statement is true it is only partial since it does not explain what Bosola has to gain by acting the moral hypocrite towards the far more evil Ferdinand.

In IV, i there is a dialogue between Bosola and the duchess which, taken in context with the preceding and subsequent action, amply suggests that Webster was willing to suspend the psychology of his character in order to affirm moral values. When the duchess is deceived into thinking that Antonio and her children have been murdered she expresses a will to die. Bosola reproaches her, saying:

> Come, you must live.
> *Dutch:* That's the greatest torture soules feele in hell,
> In hell: that they must live, and cannot die:
> *Portia,* I'll new kindle thy Coales againe,
> And revive the rare, and almost dead example
> Of a loving wife.
> *Bos:* O, fye: despaire? remember
> You are a Christian.
> *Dutch:* The Church enjoynes fasting:
> I'll starve my selfe to death.
> *Bos:* Leave this vaine sorrow;
> (81-91)

His Christian sentiments reflect neither a change of heart nor an earnest pity for her anguish because they cannot be reconciled with his later action in which he orders the executioners to strangle both her and her children while he coldly looks on. The discrepancy can be explained if one realizes

[5] Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 132.

that Webster is no longer interested at this point in the play in revealing Bosola's character (since this was established in the first scene); instead, he serves as a mask through whom the dramatist counters the duchess' temporary spiritual failure:

> *Dutch:* ... I'll goe pray: No,
> I'll goe curse:
> *Bos:* Oh fye!
> *Dutch:* I could curse the Starres —
> *Bos:* Oh fearefull!
> *Dutch:* And those three smyling seasons of the year
> Into a Russian winter: nay the world
> To its first Chaos.
> *Bos:* Looke you, the Starres shine still:
> *Dutch:* Oh, but you must remember, my curse hath a great way to goe:
> Plagues, (that make lanes through largest families)
> Consume them! —
> *Bos:* Fye Lady!
> *Dutch:* Let them like tyrants
> Never be remembered, but for the ill they have done:
> Let all the zealous prayers of mortified
> Church-men forget them —
> *Bos:* O uncharitable!
>
> (112-29)

Throughout this mock litany the duchess thrashes around in moral darkness, fulminating against the world, the seasons, her brothers and the heavens. If the stars signify deity or celestial harmony, then in cursing them the duchess blasphemes against the source of cosmic moral order. The antiphonal responses of Bosola not only express a horror of her despair and bitterness but they further indicate the ultimate futility of her curses ('Looke you, the Starres shine still').

In IV, ii a situation is set up between the intelligencer and his victim wherein their respective moral states are dramatically contrasted. As the time for the murder draws near, Bosola's spiritual disintegration is symbolized by his loss of identity; when he comes upon the duchess in her death chamber in the disguise of an old man he first tells her he is a 'tombe-maker', whereas afterwards he addresses himself as the 'common Bell-man'. Conversely, the duchess' emergence from a negative state of mind is revealed by the assertion of her personality. Having just previously endured the outrageous antics of the madmen, she is initially uncertain of her identity ('Who am I?' [122]); but as Bosola looms over her she posits her identity, first tentatively ('Am not I, thy Duchesse?' [132] and then in a resounding affirmative ('I am Duchesse of Malfy still' [139]). More important for our purpose, however, is the nature of Bosola's intervening speech:

> Thou art a box of worme-seede, at best, but a salvatory of greene mummey: what's this flesh? a little cruded milke, phantasticall puff-paste: our bodies are weaker then those paper prisons boyes use to keepe flies in: More contemptible: since ours is to preserve earth-wormes... (123-7)

Thus, when he is at the extremity of moral baseness, ready at any moment to issue his deadly command to the executioners, he delivers a Lenten-like sermon on the insignificance and corruptibility of the flesh. The dirge which he later recites to her (*'Hearke, now every thing is still —'* [180 ff.]) is in a similar Christian tone, reflecting upon corporeal vanity, the frustation of human wishes and the sorrow of worldly existence.[6] How easily Webster allows Bosola to lapse into his more characteristically evil self can be seen not only during the ruthless murder of the duchess but immediately after: 'Some other strangle the children' (246).

The last instance in which the dramatist speaks in his own voice occurs a few lines later when Ferdinand and his agent stand over the bodies and Bosola says:

> Other sinnes onely speake; Murther shreikes out:
> The element of water moistens the Earth,
> But blood flies upwards, and bedewes the Heavens.
> (278-80)

The passage scarcely constitutes his moral turning point. A man fully cognizant of the enormity of such an evil would acknowledge his share of the guilt; but the context of the passage shows him to be shifting the responsibility of the crime wholly onto the duke. Furthermore, his subsequent demand that he be paid for having accomplished the deed is at variance with a true penitent.

The dramatist does away with the inconsistency in Bosola near the close of the fourth act (ii, 365 ff.). By keeping the character's speeches in harmony with his actions from that moment until the end of the play, he seems to intend that the reader consider the murderer as having undergone an authentic change of heart. To account for the character's inconsistencies prior to this reversal, a strong case can be argued that he serves, to a great extent, as Webster's mouthpiece in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Besides satirizing courtiers and court society, he is the one person, surpassing even the duchess, who philosophizes most often on good and evil. The irony which operates throughout his speeches cannot, in itself, account for the unresolved conflict between psychological realism and the moral viewpoint. A more cogent explanation is that Webster, in order to emphasize the moral values in the play, was willing to subordinate his art to his vision.

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[6] Travis Bogard's remark, that in the disguise of the bellman Bosola consciously performs a Christian service for the duchess by preparing her soul for death, has a limited validity. Cf. *The Tragic Satire of John Webster* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), pp. 70-3. Webster does allow Bosola to fulfill the traditional role of the bellman but only incidentally and for reasons other than permitting him any genuine concern for the duchess.