THE AMBIGUITY OF BOSOLA

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The character of Bosola is unquestionably one of the most complex and elusive in the major Jacobean drama. In the face of the monumental complexities of the play in which he is such an important figure, critics have, almost without exception, avoided the task of attempting a complex examination of the character.[1] But to me it appears undeniable that Webster intended Bosola as a major tragic protagonist, and the strategic unwisdom of examining the character must therefore be risked.[2]

First, about Bosola as protagonist[3]: he appears first as a rather impressive villain. He undergoes a profound change during the scene in which he supervises the murder of the Duchess, Cariola, and the children. He dies having successfully exacted revenge on those whom he regards as the real villains, Ferdinand and the Cardinal.[4] These very obvious facts do not, of course, *prove* that Bosola is designed as a tragic protagonist, but they are suggestive. Even more suggestive is the fact that most of the last act is given over to Bosola's getting his revenge. Surely those critics miss the point who insist that since the Duchess dies in Act IV, Act V is necessarily irrelevant. Archer's remark that after the murder of

[1] Only Travis Bogard (*The Tragic Satire of John Webster* [Berkeley, 1955]) has attempted a careful analysis of Bosola's function in the play. Professor Bogard perceives far more clearly than any earlier critic Bosola's importance in the tragedy. Our analyses differ partly in matters of emphasis, partly in that I see Bosola as a full-fledged tragic protagonist.

[2] It is not my intention to examine Bosola independently of the dramatic context, to speculate about "the boyhood of Bosola," for example. I see him as a central and pivotal figure in the play, and in that context I propose to examine him.

[3] It may be objected that if Webster had intended Bosola to be regarded as a tragic figure, he would not have called his play *The Duchess of Malfi*. But I do not say that Bosola is *the* tragic figure. Brutus is undeniably the protagonist in *Julius Caesar*, and, by the early years of the seventeenth century, plays with tragic characters not specified in titles were not uncommon. *Cf.* Webster's own Brachiano and Flamineo, Enobarbus, the numerous tragic figures in *Women Beware Women*, Gloucester in *King Lear*, Mosbie and Alice in *Arden of Feversham*.

[4] See V. v. 102-103. All references are to the Lucas edition.

the Duchess the play must drag its festering length out for another act [5] may be dismissed as the work of a critic who set out to prove that modern drama is superior to Elizabethan and Restoration drama and did prove this, to his own and Shaw's satisfaction. But better men than Archer have questioned the necessity of continuing the play at such length after the death of the Duchess.[6] Webster had, of course, a serious technical problem: his heroine is almost completely passive. In order to end the play with any semblance of tragic justice, it may well have been necessary to create, or at least develop, an active tragic hero. The alternative, an Aragonian trilogy, was hardly feasible. At any rate, Act V of *The Duchess of Malfi* is not irrelevant, for in that act Webster seems to be working out the tragic destiny of Bosola. My assumption, then, is that Bosola is a tragic figure, and my purpose here is to examine him as such and to offer some suggestions as to the ultimate significance Webster seems to have attributed to him.

Bosola impresses us immediately as being ambiguous, and this ambiguity I assume is wholly intentional on Webster's part. The old view, recently resurrected by Clifford Leech in a book which should have been authoritative, that Webster is simply careless and/or forgetful, must, I think, be rejected.[7] Certainly we are not justified in accusing a writer of carelessness or incompetence until we have made a substantial attempt to understand his ambiguous or clouded passages. The ambiguous presentation of the character begins in the first act, when two seemingly completely contradictory views of Bosola are presented, in three speeches, two by Antonio, and one by Delio. Antonio speaks first:

> . . . Here comes Bosola
> The onely Court-Gall: yet I observe his rayling
> Is not for simple love of Piety:
> Indeede he rayles at those things which he wants,
> Would be as leacherous, covetous, or proud,
> Bloody, envious, as any man,
> If he had meanes to be so [I. i. 23-29; Lucas' edition used throughout].

Delio knew Bosola to have been seven years in the galleys for "a

[5] Quoted by Lucas, II, p. 24.
[6] Clifford Leech, *John Webster* (London, 1951), pp. 65-66.
[7] *John Webster*, p. 66.

notorious murther" (I. i. 70-71), and Antonio remarks, in the same scene,

> . . . 'Tis great pitty
> He should be thus neglected [by the Cardinal]—I have heard
> He's very valiant: This foule mellancholly
> Will poyson all his goodnesse . . . [I. i. 75-78]

Early in the play, then, Bosola is lecherous, covetous, proud, bloody, envious, a murderer, valiant—and with goodness to be poisoned by his melancholy. And the audience sees him also as a malcontent, whose comments on the world are no prettier than those of Malevole, although sometimes more entertaining and more eloquent.[8]

Now what is the significance of this ambiguous, even contradictory, introduction of Bosola, in the words of Antonio and Deilo? Almost irreconcilable contradictions seem to be involved, and this has been described as a structural defect resulting from Webster's carelessness. But are we actually justified in assuming that in a space of less than fifty lines an experienced playwright should forget what he had just written? That is, after all, what we are asked to assume. I should think that we would certainly be on safer ground if we assumed that the contradiction is intentional and that Webster is asking us to believe that Bosola has *both* the good and the evil qualities and potentialities enumerated by Antonio and Delio. This makes it possible for us to begin with the assumption that the character is ambiguous, but not nebulous. Certainly, at this point in the play, we ought to suspend judgment about structural defects, watch closely how the character develops, and assume for the moment that he is indeed compact of these seemingly incompatible qualities.

Bosola is also a spy and a professional assassin, one who is quite prepared to carry out his orders, but one who must also articulate his pangs of conscience, as his words to Ferdinand indicate:

> I would have you curse your selfe now, that your bounty
> (Which makes men truly noble) ere should make
> Me a villaine: oh, that to avoid ingratitude
> For the good deed you have done me, I must doe
> All the ill man can invent: Thus the Divell
> Candies all sinnes [o'er]: and what Heven termes vild,
> That names he complementall. [I. i. 295-301]

[8] See, *e. g.*, II. i. 19-64.

So far, the picture of Bosola is, to say, the least, clouded, ambiguous; but the difficulties are only beginning. In III. 2, after he has assumed his rôle as spy and shortly before the Duchess reveals to him that she is Antonio's wife, Bosola speaks of Antonio in highly complimentary, and perhaps sincere, terms:

> . . . He was an excellent
> Courtier, and most faithfull, a souldier, that thought it
> As Beastly to know his owne value too little,
> As devillish to acknowledge it too much,
> Both his vertue, and forme, deserv'd a farre better fortune:
> His discourse rather delighted to judge it selfe, than shew it selfe.
> His breast was fill'd with all perfection,
> And yet it seem'd a private whispering roome.
> It made so little noyse of't. [III. ii. 290-298]

It is entirely possible that Bosola is merely trying to trap the Duchess here, but what he says about Antonio in these lines is nevertheless apparently true.[9] In III. 5, however, after Bosola, acting on Ferdinand's orders, has apprehended the Duchess, he speaks very differently of Antonio, calling him a "base, low-fellow" (III. v. 140), "One of no birth" (143), one possessed of "A barren beggarly vertue" (147). Here, it has been said, we find Bosola in effect saving the Duchess from herself, making her angry enough to forget her own danger and be not a weak and fearful woman, but the Duchess of Malfi.[10] This is possible; but it seems to me that we are simply viewing Bosola here as Ferdinand's creature, and that at this point in the play we are given, in quite specific terms, a very important clue to the secret of Bosola. The Duchess, listening to these uncharitable and inaccurate comments, replies, "Were I a man:/I'll'd beat that counterfeit face, into thy other" (141-142). The "counterfeit face" is the one she sees now, as Bosola insults her husband; the "other" is what should perhaps be called the "real" face, which she had seen earlier, when, out of whatever motives, he had spoken very differently about Antonio.

The next time we see Bosola, he has the "other" face. The Duchess is imprisoned in her palace, and Bosola very affectingly

[9] We cannot prove this; but, evidence to the contrary lacking, we may certainly assume it.

[10] Bogard, *The Tragic Satire of John Webster*, pp. 69-70.

describes her plight to the madman Ferdinand. Then we see the "counterfeit," as he reveals to the Duchess "the artificiall figures of Antonio, and his children; appearing as if they were dead." Observing his victim's grief, he tells her, whether he means it or not, that he pities her. When the Duchess, losing her tremendous composure for a moment, says that she could curse the stars, Bosola makes an observation which may perhaps be taken as a description of the totally indifferent universe of Websterian tragedy: "Looke you, the Starres shine still" (IV. i. 120). But when the Duchess leaves the stage, he will plead with Ferdinand to spare her further torment; and when Ferdinand tells him, first that his work is almost ended, and second, that he must see the Duchess yet once more, Bosola's reply is extraordinarily puzzling:

> . . . Never in mine owne shape,
> That's forfeited, by my intelligence,
> And this last cruell lie: when you send me next,
> The business shalbe comfort. [IV. i. 161-164]

Bosola's "owne shape" has been forfeited by his acting as Ferdinand's intelligencer in the household of the Duchess and by the "cruell lie," that is, Ferdinand's statement that Bosola's work is almost ended. His own shape is forfeit, and he appears, figuratively, in a counterfeit shape, a kind of disguise. When he says that "The business shalbe comfort," we may take the statement quite seriously, only we will have to see what kind of comfort it actually turns out to be. At this point in the play, then, Bosola is facing a crisis of his own which is in many ways far more serious than that which his victim faces. She, at least, is spiritually prepared to die. When we see Bosola again, in the murder scene, he is disguised as an old man, first a tomb-maker, then,

> . . . the common Bell-man
> That usually is sent to condemned persons
> The night before they suffer. [IV. ii. 173-175]

It is commonly asserted that Bosola, having caused the Duchess so much agony already, cannot now bear to have her recognize him as he comes to supervise her murder, or, more simply, that he is ashamed to appear in his own shape. But this explanation hardly takes into account the facts which have already been detailed above. In the first place, the combined disguise as tomb-maker and bell-

man is highly significant; in the second place, we should recall his words spoken in the preceding scene: "... when you send me next,/ The businesse shalbe comfort." The bellman is sent to condemned persons the night before they suffer, to bring them comfort. Specifically, the comfort appears in the curiously moving and chilling lines on mutability which Bosola chants to the accompaniment of the tolling bell:

> Hearke, now everything is still—
> The Schritch-Owle and the whistler shrill,
> Call upon our Dame, aloud,
> And bid her quickly don her shrowd:
> Much you had of Land and rent,
> Your length in Clay's now competent.
> A long war disturb'd your minde,
> Here your perfect peace is sign'd—
> Of what is't fooles make such vaine keeping?
> Sin their conception, their birth, weeping:
> Their life, a generall mist of error,
> Their death, a hideous storme of terror—
> Strew your haire, with powders sweete:
> Don cleane linnen, bath your feete,
> And (the foule feend more to checke)
> A crucifixe let blesse your necke,
> 'Tis now full tide, 'tweene night, and day,
> End your groane, and come away. [IV. ii. 180-197]

Grim comfort, perhaps, but of a kind not unusual in the early seventeenth century. The purpose of the song is apparently to make the victim welcome death by showing how ghastly life can be, and accordingly the Duchess says:

> ... Tell my brothers,
> That I perceive death, (now I am well awake)
> Best guift is, they can give, or I can take. [230-231] [11]

As Bosola observes, after her death, "her infelicitie/ Seem'd to have yeeres too many" (282-283). Part of Bosola's comfort, perhaps, consisted in putting an end to that infelicity.[12]

[11] With respect to IV. ii., up to the murder of the Duchess, I am essentially in agreement with Professor Bogard.

[12] *Cf.* Hamlet's

> Absent thee from felicity a while
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story [V. ii. 358-60].

Quoted from G. B. Harrison's edition (New York, 1948).

After the murder, Ferdinand expresses his newly-discovered hatred of Bosola, in language which seems peculiarly relevant to the Bosola with the counterfeit face and the disguise:

> For thee, (as we observe in Tragedies
> That a good Actor many times is curss'd
> For playing a villaines part) I hate thee for't:
> [IV. ii. 306-309]

At the end of the play, shortly before he dies, Bosola is to describe himself as having been "an actor in the main of all" (V. v. 106). But if he has been an actor until the Duchess' death, he casts off that rôle shortly after:

> . . . Off my painted honour!—
> While with vaine hopes, our faculties we tyre,
> We seeme to sweate in yce, and freeze in fire;
> What would I doe, we[r]e this to doe againe?
> I would not change my peace of conscience
> For all the wealth of Europe. [VI. ii. 362-367]

What, it should be asked, is the significance of this disguise-theme in the unfolding of the character of Bosola? Why the counterfeit face, the disguises, the comparison with actors? The answer seems inescapable: Bosola has been, in effect, an actor, playing a rôle. If he has been playing a rôle, then, necessarily, he has not been himself. (I do not suggest, of course, that his acting has been conscious.) The symbolic throwing-off of the disguise must certainly mean that the actor has become the man, that instead of acting out further the rôle of Ferdinand's creature or the rôle of a vicious malcontent, he will now abide by his own principles. This of course is not merely a technical device to tell us that Bosola has changed. It has profound philosophical implications, and in the tragic context it is intensely ironic. Bosola, acting a part in the tragedy of the Duchess, has prospered. But now he must step forward and be the protagonist in his own tragedy, and this he cannot do until he is indeed himself, understanding himself and committed to doing what he knows is morally right. Ideally, this is what anyone should do, and, generally speaking, most tragedies are somehow concerned with this problem. Faustus and Macbeth and Hamlet know what they should do but are psychologically unable to do it. Brutus knows what he should do and does it. Lear and Gloucester learn what they should have done. Coriolanus learns

what he should do. And Bosola learns what he should do. Another way to put this, without the riddling language, is to say that tragedy is somehow concerned with the problem of self-fulfillment, of achieving one's destiny. Self-fulfillment cannot occur, one cannot achieve his destiny, if he is merely playing a rôle in someone else's play: the play must be his own. From playing his rôle, Bosola has learned something important; having learned it, he must apply the lesson to his own life.

In connection with the reorientation of Bosola's motives, Professor Bogard argues that, having allowed himself to be maneuvered into a position where he owes complete loyalty to Ferdinand, Bosola must carry out Ferdinand's orders, but, at the same time, through compassion, must save the Duchess from herself, *i. e.*, must make her, in the face of death, remain "Duchess of Malfi still," rather than descending to mere woman.[13] Professor Bogard's argument is cogent and his evidence persuasive. But it seems to me that this view does not quite allow for that degree of tension which is to be resolved when Bosola, realizing fully the significance of his actions, decides on a course of revenge against Ferdinand and the Cardinal. What he has learned by watching the Duchess suffer forces him to follow a new course.[14] Bosola's ambiguity of motive has, until now, created tremendous dramatic tension. The ambiguity resolved, the tension ceases, and Bosola pursues the path of right. The alteration in tone after Act IV, so often attributed to the fact that, the heroine being dead, what follows is anti-climactic, may well be due precisely to the fact that the tension of ambiguity *has* been resolved.

Continuing his discussion of Bosola's change, Professor Bogard writes: "Only in the end, when the Duchess is dead, does his integrity reassert itself. But it is then too late for redemption." [15]

[13] *The Tragic Satire of John Webster*, pp. 67-79.

[14] See IV. ii. 362-403.

[15] *The Tragic Satire of John Webster*, p. 79. "The tool-villain [an unfortunate phrase], . . . who, like Flamineo and unlike Malevole and Vendice, is tool-villain in his own character and not as a disguise, chooses, after being cheated, the better part, and avenges his victim" (Elmer Edgar Stoll, *John Webster* [Boston, 1905], p. 118). But of course Bosola *is* disguised, both literally and metaphorically. And he avenges not only his victim, but Antonio, "lustful Julia," and of some importance, himself. See V. v. 102-108. Whether Malevole can be called a "tool-villain" is an

But it is precisely here that his redemption begins. How can one speak of redemption, in a tragic sense, without a correlative sin?—an objectively correlative sin at that, since we cannot be overly concerned about those anterior crimes mentioned in Act I.

To recapitulate: the first and most consistent salient fact about Bosola is his ambiguity. This is established at the beginning of the play, and throughout the early scenes it expands, takes on new dimensions. In III. v, the Duchess refers to his counterfeit face; in IV. ii, he appears in disguise, is compared to a good actor playing a villain's part, removes his disguise, and henceforth devotes his life to atonement. After the murder of the Duchess, Bosola emerges as a changed man, or, more accurately, emphasis is placed on aspects of his character which had only been suggested earlier. Webster has objectified this new emphasis in two statements of Bosola's about the stars: "Look you, the stars shine still," he sardonically tells the Duchess when she would curse them. When he accidentally kills Antonio he speaks of the stars again, but from a very different point of view: "We are meerely the Starres tennys-balls (strooke, and banded Which way please them)—" (V. iv. 63-64). In Webster's universe, this constitutes a part of wisdom, and it is ironic that with this knowledge Bosola must still pursue his fatal path of right. This path will of course lead him to get revenge on Ferdinand and the Cardinal and in doing so to meet his own death. Toward the close of the play, he explains his motives:

> Revenge, for the Duchesse of Malfy, murdered
> By th'Aragonian brethren: for Antonio,
> Slaine by [t]his hand: for lustfull Julia,
> Poyson'd by this man: and lastly, for my selfe,
> (That was an Actor in the maine of all,
> Much 'gainst mine owne good nature, yet i'th'end
> Neglected.) [V. v. 102-108]

The total impression seems to be of Bosola slowly, definitely emerging from a kind of moral and intellectual disguise early in the play, to a genuine understanding of his true identity at the end of IV. ii, to a final personal redemption at the end of the play. His disguise in the murder scene seems to objectify the problem of his identity. It seems to mean not only that in the

interesting question, an answer to which lies beyond the purview of this paper. Certainly, though, Mendoza is.

murder scene he is symbolically *not* the Bosola we see later, but to suggest that the true Bosola has only been glimpsed before, never clearly seen. In the most dramatic and moving scene of the play (IV. ii), he removes his disguise and emerges with his evil qualities gone and only his good qualities—"mine own good nature"—remaining. The idea of Bosola as an actor, with a counterfeit face and a disguise, with his and Ferdinand's references to himself as an actor, is entirely consistent with the ambiguous preliminary presentation of the character in the words of Antonio and Delio at the beginning of the play.

With respect to his own tragedy, Bosola's emergence may be described as follows: as a kind of cynical act of rebellion against an evil universe, he pursues an evil course himself, rationalizing it in terms of gratitude and devotion to Ferdinand. He learns, through observing the suffering of the Duchess and through his other experiences, the virtue of her passiveness and a somewhat more masculine, active concept, which is that even in an evil universe one must remain virtuous—true to himself—and actively labor for what appears right. One must not only *see* himself: one must *be* himself. This, in Malraux's famous phrase, is *la condition humaine*; and this is one of the facts which give tragic significance to human life. So Bosola seems to suggest, in his dying words:

> . . . Oh this gloomy world,
> In what a shadow, or deepe pit of darkness,
> Doth (womanish, and feareful) mankind live!
> Let worthy mindes nere stagger in distrust
> To suffer death or shame, for what is just— [V. v. 124-128]

Bosola emerges then as a kind of baroque figure, struggling against an unyielding, darkly beautiful universe which produces evil, insists on virtue, but ultimately destroys evil and virtue alike. For Webster and for others, this is certainly man's tragic fate.

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