IMAGERY IN THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

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The major studies of John Webster as a dramatist and poet do not sufficiently treat his use of figurative language. Some try to place his use of imagery in a definite tradition (Leech 1851, Stoll 1905); others, seeing only the major result, classify his images as creators of tone and mood (Bogard 1955, Brooke 1916). Perhaps a consideration of both these opinions is what allows Allen Tate to suggest that Webster shares honors with Ford at the furthest extension of the Elizabethan theme: “Depravity is the theme of Elizabethan tragedy, I think, as early as The Jew of Malta. There is no need to cite Webster and Ford” (Tate 1960: 253). Hereward T. Price (1961) attempts to rectify these incomplete notes on Webster’s imagery, but, unfortunately, the picture remains distorted, for, in his eagerness to show that Webster’s use of language is subtle and meaningful, Price overstates his case. However, the major reason Webster suffers in Price’s work is not over-enthusiasm for Webster; Price simply attempts too much. First, he hopes that his study of imagery in Webster will prove that image-counting and evaluating is a valid enterprise (1961: 225). Second, he intends to show that this larger purpose is particularly well-served by Webster because of this characteristic use of imagery in The white devil and The duchess of Malfi. Specifically, Price notes that Webster’s imagery is carefully correlated to the action of the play. Unlike many other dramatists of the age, who were content to “decorate” their plays with allusions and word-pictures, Webster worked with the “figure of language” and the “figure of action”, two levels which he brought together in an integrated whole in his drama (1961: 227). Finally, Price implies (1961: 228) that Webster employs imagery in traditional ways as well: “It reveals character, it does the work of argument, it emphasizes mood, and it prefigures the events to come”.
Price hopes to bring all these notions together by showing how, at any time, an image may be working in some traditional way, may be correlating with part of the action of the play, and may be emphasizing the basic theme of the drama: the conflict between appearance and reality (1961: 228).

I do not intend to give an extended account here of how Price goes about bringing these disparate purposes together. What I would like to suggest, however, is that Webster's imagery functions more traditionally than Price believes and that it serves a larger and more unified purpose than the critics he attacks believe. Specifically, I think the errors involved are the following:

1) Those critics who observe that Webster's imagery is only part of a tradition overlook the particular use of language in a given play. 2) Those who indicate that Webster's imagery is primarily mood-creating are concerned with only one function of figurative language. 3) Bradbrook's (1961) idea, that the play is a conflict between "Fate" and "Chance", does not take into consideration the explicit motive for the "Aragonian brothers" actions. 4) Price's attempt to unify so many different themes, using Webster as a test case for the investigation of imagery, causes him to overlook significant contributions to the appearance-reality conflict which do not correlate with some particular aspect of action in the play, to ignore several restorated themes, and to miss a larger group of images which expand a theme not previously discussed - the notion that the motive for action by the brothers is realistic.

That Webster's imagery is more carefully correlated to the action of the play than Shakespeare's is debatable. Price notes (1961: 228) that there are thirty references to poisoning in The white devil and a "number of notable poisonings". He indicates, as well, that in The duchess of Malfi the image is often spoken in the midst of the action. A quick inventory of such images through the major periods of technique. In Richard II, Richard plays on the theme of falling royalty and his own physical descent when he cries:

Down, down I come, like glittering Phaeton,
Wanting the name of marble jade.
In the base court. Base court, where kings grow base,
To come at traitors' calls and do them grace.
In the base court! Come down! Down, court! Down, King!

(V, ii, 388-399)

Love's labour's lost, an early comedy, Biron says to Rosaline:

Thrust thy sharp wit through my ignorance;
Out me to pieces with thy keen conceit.

Although Shakespeare never makes a character of his a Cyrrano, who recites verse to describe his every move, the tragedies and last plays are full of those correlated images of which Price makes Webster the master. In both of Macbeth's best-remembered soliloquies, in a series of mood-provoking images, he describes his movements. King Lear's famous storm speech is certainly language "in action", for it describes the setting, Lear's state of mind, and his stormy behavior. Of the last plays, The tempest is the best example of the correlated imagery under discussion, and, in it, Ariel, more than any other character, uses imagery to describe his actions. He, after fulfilling Prospero's orders, compares his activities to natural phenomena and heavenly disturbances:

I boarded the King's ship. Now on the hek.
Now in the waists, the deck, in every cabin,
I flamed unamusement. Sometime I'd divide,
And burn in many places; on the topmast.
The yards and hawspurk, would I flame distinctly,
Then meet, and join. Love's lightnings, the precursors
Of the dreadful thunderlove, more momentary
And sight-entraining were not.

(V, ii, 194-205)

This short list does not deprecate the use of imagery by either dramatist. I wish to show only that Shakespeare's imagery, like Webster's, is more than decorative and thematic; it is both, but it is, as well, as reflective of the action of the play as Webster's is. What has been shown of Shakespeare's imagery can, I am sure, also be shown of Marlowe's, and of many others of the period.

It is unnecessary to deal with the first two errors mentioned above, for Price's study, though exaggerated in its purposes, destroys the notion that Webster's imagery serves only traditional or mood-creating functions. What I intend to examine most carefully are Price's larger conclusions about The duchess of Malfi.

When it is argued that the major theme of The duchess of Malfi is the conflict between appearance and reality, does that argument mean anything...
more than the concept of dramatic irony is being used to its utmost? I do not think so. Price admits (1961: 228), for example, that of the traditional uses of imagery the “figuring the events to come” category is the one which best serves the purposes of the basic conflict in the play, but he does not show how this theme of appearance and reality is a constant one, developed intentionally, with one side appearance and the other reality or with ideas carefully divided along those lines. His one attempt to bring this theme into sharp focus is a failure. He asserts (1961: 243) that the Duchess’ final doom is brought about by her one reliance on appearance: the feigned pilgrimage. This suggests that the “creatures of appearance” have been the Cardinal and Ferdinand and the honest figures the Duchess and Antonio, and that honesty’s descent into lies is the cause of honesty’s doom. On the contrary, the Duchess, though not to the detriment of her character, has been a liar from the first of the play. As the brothers leave Amalfi, she tells them she will never marry, but by the end of that same scene she and Antonio have contracted a secret marriage. Is the reader or viewer to assume that the Duchess had no plans concerning Antonio when she spoke to her brothers and that her attraction, affection, wooing and marriage are still contained in the last part of scene one? A more explicit lie, however, is the Duchess’ verbal excuse for feigning when she finds it necessary to accuse Antonio of tampering with her funds:

I must now accuse you
Of such feigned crime as Tasso calls
Magnanima mensurum: a noble lie;
Cause it must shield our honors.

(III, ii, 178-181)

The Duchess’ doom is not brought about by one act of feigning. She has feigned or concealed her intent to marry, her marriage, her children, her husband’s identity — in short, she has been forced by circumstances to live “a noble lie”. It is impossible, then, to attribute the fall of the play’s noble characters to their related or single fall from honesty. As Price indicates, though not to his purpose, Antonio, as well, is involved in appearances:

You are deceived in him:
His nature is too honest for such business.

(I, ii, 159-169)

Since appearance and reality, in the form of dramatic irony, serve the play throughout, it is impossible to overlook their development; however, there is no one-sidedness to the conflict, and it is not developed in such a way as to indicate that it is the “theme” of the play. Is it possible, then, to determine, from the language, a major theme for The Duchess of Malfi?

For various reasons Price, Bradbrook, Parrott and Ball, Stoll, Leech, and Bogard slight several themes in the play. Perhaps the least sighted,

however, is the “storm” image. Parrott and Ball do not directly refer to it, but they hint at it when they mention the “storm” the “Aragonian brothers” are to let loose on the Duchess and Antonio (1558: 230). Price, as usual, is more explicit. He does the Duchess’ “Time will easily scatter the tempest” (I, ii, 178-180) as an indication of her mood in the first act. He notes, too, the description of the Cardinal as a “foul porcupine before a storm” (III, iii, 54). Finally, he calls attention to the Cardinal and Ferdinand when they speak of the Duchess’ feigned pilgrimage as a “riding hood to keep her from the sun and tempest” (III, iii, 60-61). The theme is much better developed, however, and, ironically, there are images of bad weather which better fit the purpose of “appearance and reality”. Bosola, after getting gold from Ferdinand, knows that he must work for it, and he foresees the evil ahead:

Never raised such showers as these
Without thunderbolts: it’s the tail of them.

(I, ii, 177-178)

Not only do the brothers lose a storm on the unfortunate Duchess and her husband, but one of them, Ferdinand, is like a storm when he reacts to her “indiscretion”. The Cardinal asks him, “Why do you make yourself so wild a tempest?” (II, v, 16-17). In the same scene, the Cardinal describes his brother’s rage:

How liable is this rage, which carries you
As men conveyed by witches through the air
On violent whirlwinds.

(II, v, 49-51)

When Ferdinand verifies the accusations against the Duchess, Bosola tells her that “The Duke your brother is taken up in a whirlwind” (III, ii, 161). If, however, Price’s major concern was to relate the “figure of language” to the “figure of action” and then both to the theme of appearance and reality, he certainly should have noticed the Duchess’ words to Bosola when she and her husband are handed the equivocal letter:

See, see, like to calm weather
At sea before a tempest, false hearts speak fair
To those they intend most mischief.

(III, v, 34-36)

As insignificant a character as Grisolan remarks, “Twas a foul storm tonight” (V, iv, 20), a line as terse and meaningful (and, like it, bordering on the humorous) as Macbeth’s “Twas a rough night”. Finally, Antonio ironically comments on the job the storm has already done, although he is unaware of the Duchess’ death:
such references. Webster would seem to be stressing the "reality" of drama in *The Duchess of Malfi*. That is, he is not using references to drama as reminders of the fiction involved on stage, reminders which might relieve the dramatic tension, but as reminders that life itself is sometimes an "improbable fiction" or series of meaningless events. The Duchess makes this idea most explicit when she mourns the part she must play in this world after she supposes Antonio dead: "I account this world a tedious theater; for I do play a part in it against my will" (IV, i, 81-82). Ferdinand notes the effect drama has on an audience: "As we observe in tragedies, that a good actor many times is curse'd; for playing a villain's part" (IV, ii, 298-300). Contrary to this, however, Bosola notes that the theater is the realm of improbability, for when he reflects on his mistaken murder of Antonio, he muses: "Such a mistake as I have often seen in a play" (V, v, 98-99), though he emphasizes the reality of the theater when he tells of himself: "... that was an actor in the main of all..." (V, v, 88).

It would not be worthwhile to dwell further on the "meaning" these references to drama might have in *The Duchess of Malfi*, but any study of imagery in that play must include them since they refer to the fiction which is itself in the act of being presented; for that reason, if no other, they attract attention to themselves.

The most significant omission in the discussions of imagery in this play is the lack of reference to the plant and animal images. Of the former, little can be said, for the references to plants match the predominant mood of the play and might be cataloged along with the references to disease and decay. For example, Bosola describes the brothers as "plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich and overlaid with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them" (I, i, 53-56).

Much more significant are the many animals of the play. Some of them — owls, vipers, adders, rats — perform the same function as the references to disease and decay do, but others, the many fantastic creatures of the play, seem to be of some significance to the theme of appearance and reality. There are cockatrices, basilisks, salamanders, and, of course, one wolfman. Perhaps these animals, most of them harmful to man as well as miraculous, are simply further extensions of the "dark mood" of the play rather than examples of images which further the theme of appearance and reality.

This theme of darkness, however, is expanded and another entirely different theme is introduced by the predominant image of the play. There are, at least, some twenty images which have birds as their subject matter. Aside from images, there are many other simple references to birds in the play. Some of these, as the "pies and crows" that feed on the rotten but productive plum trees, are "birds of darkness" and serve the theme of evil which runs throughout the drama. The owl is particularly exploited as the omen of
evil and death. His appearance in that role is foreshadowed by Ferdinand's words to the Duchess after he learns of the marriage: "The howling of a wolf/Its music to thee screech-owl" (III, i, 89-90). The owl reappears in the role of "evil bird" when the madmen sing "of beasts and fatal fowl/As ravens, screech-owls, bulls and bears" (IV, ii, 64-65). Ferdinand, in his madness, wants to "hunt the badger by owl-light" (IV, ii, 345). When Bosola comes as the "fatal bellman", he, too, speaks of the owl:

Hark, now every thing is still.
The screech-owl and the whistler shrill
Call upon our dame aloud
And bid her quickly don her shroud.

(Iv, ii, 187-190)

The "dark birds" are most carefully related to the themes of evil, decay, poison, and, especially, disease when Bosola mocks the old midwife:

I would sooner eat a dead pigeon taken
From the soles of the feet of one sick
Of the plague than kiss one of you
Fasting.

(II, i, 45-48)

The most important birds, however, are not the ones which stand for evil or disease. The song birds and the game birds seem to parallel the most realistic conflict of the drama — the tension between hunter and hunted. Several things other than the profusion of bird images lead to this conclusion. The first, and most important of these, is a reinterpretation of the brothers' motive. Most readers note, quite simply, that the play is a fine example of the English "Italianate" drama, and is, therefore, characterized by treachery and evil; Bradbrook (1961) would have the play dominated by fate or chance; Price (1961), as we have seen, thinks the basic idea of the play may be found in the conflict between appearance and reality. Most of these interpretations depend, to some extent, on the validity of the motivation for the brothers' cruelty. Parrot and Ball (1958: 230) state the case quite simply:

Webster does not motivate as clearly as he might have done the cause of the brothers' persecution of their sister. Ferdinand's reference to the "infinit" of treasure he has hoped for at her death is a misleading afterthought.

Yet there is nothing in the character of the brothers to suggest that they would not pursue such a course. Exactly as their mock-pity covers their cruelty when the Duchess goes on her feigned pilgrimage, so their mock-concern for decorum covers their greed. Interpretation will become difficult indeed if the words of a character who has nothing to lose cannot be trusted. Webster seems to make quite explicit the fact that Antonio and the Duchess are people who are not allowed to cater to their own desires, for their intentions conflict with the desires of others. What other minor themes, philosophic or Elizabethan, might be injected into the drama, seem incidental to this major conflict of interests.

Aside from the explicit references to birds, there are three references to the use of nets. Early in the play the Cardinal speaks of nets to capture lovers when he mentions "Vulcan's engine"; the net the blacksmith of the gods used to capture the lovers Mars and Venus. The Duchess and her lover, Antonio, will, of course, be caught in the net of tyranny the brothers cast over the entire drama. Later, when Antonio asks Delio about the sincerity of the "Aragonian brethren", he gets this reply:

I misdoubt it.
For though they have sent their letters of safe conduct
For you to repair to Milan, they appear but nets to
Entrap you.

(V, i, 2-6)

Finally, Bosola, the same character who relates birds to disease, relates the birds to the nets used for their capture:

I would have you tell me
Whether is it not worse that frights the silly birds
Out of the cove, or that doth allure them
To the nets?

(III, v, 99-102)

The bird imagery parallels the most realistic interpretation of the play's major conflict: the Duchess and Antonio are the "silly birds", and the "Aragonian brethren" control the nets.

There is another factor, however, which substantiates the notion that birds play an important role in The Duchess of Malfi. In John Webster's borrowings, Robert W. Dent carefully traces the sources for many of Webster's phrases and ideas. Although he explains how changes are made in the source material (Dent 1960: 12-19), he does not show how the sources might be changed to fit such a specific purpose as imagery. There are a significant number of sources for the Duchess of Malfi which, when adapted by Webster for the play, contain references to birds, references which were not specifically present in the source. In act one, scene three, when Antonio is making fun of the married man's state, he speaks of the father who hears his child "chatter/ /Like a taught starling" (112-113). Here Webster makes specific the name of a bird; in the source, Elyot's The image of governance, the term is more general:

I am sure that starlings can no more hurt me, but only take from me the name of a father, or the dotage pleasure to so crye lytell some ryde on a collyhew, or to hooe byrnem chatter and speakes like a wanton (Dent 1960:189).
Antonio gives the fled servants, too, a specific bird's name, while the source, Philolinus, refers only to birds. Antonio says, "But your wiser hunte/Now they are fledg'd, are gone" (III, v, 5-6). In Philolinus, the line reads, "Your friends be flied. In deed ye brought them well up till they were flied, and therefore no marui, thou they bee flown" (Dent 1960: 229). In act three, scene five, the Duchess, wishing for death, compares her condition to "Phoebas, and Quilles, when they are not fat enough/To be eaten" (110-111). In Arcadia, the words are more general: "...with the same pittle as fowles kepe foule, when they are not fatte enough for their eating)..." (Dent 1960: 229). Finally, in act five, scene two, "Crows, Dawes, and Sterlings" (31) replace the "sheepes" in the following quotation from Arcadia: "Eagles we see fly alone; and they are but sheepe, which alwayes flocke together" (Dent 1960: 247).

All these changes indicate that Webster probably had in mind the specific motif which best illustrates the realistic theme of the play - the conflict between hunter and hunted. Webster adds to these modified sources a number of simple references to birds, several original images with birds and flying as their subject matter, and finally, several unchanged sources, already containing explicit reference to birds.

On the theme of caged birds, the Duchess says:

Thou art a fool.
The robin redbreast and the nightingale
Never live long in cages.

The reverse of this theme occurs when the Cardinal tells his mistress, Julia, how thankful she should be for the freedom his attentions have given her:

You may thank me, lady.
I have taken you off your melancholy perch.
Bore you on my fist, and showed you games,
And let you fly at it.

Although both images are of "captive" birds, the contrast between caged songbirds and hawks is effective.
The madmen do not mention only the "dark birds": they sing also of the swan, who welcomes death. The most explicit statement of the theme, however, is made by Bosola, who had earlier combined birds and nets, birds and disease:

O she's gone again. There the cords of life broke,
O sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps
On turto's feathers, whilst a guilty conscience

In a black register wherein is writ
All our good deeds and bad, a prospecte
That shows us hell.

(references)