

# LITERATURE

## IMAGERY IN *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*

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The major studies of John Webster as 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 1951, 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 reiterated 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 glistening Phaeton,  
Wanting the manage of unruly jades  
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!

(III, iii, 78-82)

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

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

(V, ii, 398-399)

How carefully here Shakespeare correlates the language of argument to the lover's action. But in a later and more successful comedy, *Twelfth night*, the

language is the perfect vehicle of description:

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for  
a boy, as a squash is before 'tis a peascod, or a  
codling when 'tis almost an apple. 'Tis with him  
in standing water, between man and boy.

(I, v, 165-168)

and action:

Maria: Will you hoist sail, sir? Here lies your way.  
Viola: No, good swabber, I am to hull here a little longer.

(I, v, 214-215)

Although Shakespeare never makes a character of his a Cyrano, 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 beak,  
Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin,  
I flamed amazement. Sometimes I'd divide,  
And burn in many places; on the topmast,  
The yards and bowsprit, would I flame distinctly,  
Then meet, and join. Jove's lightnings, the precursors  
O' the dreadful thunderclaps, more momentary  
And sight-outrunning were not.

(I, 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 "prefiguring 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 mensogna: 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 belated 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, 159-160)

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 slighted,

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 (1958 : 230). Price, as usual, is more explicit. He cites 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 porpoise 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 rained such showers as these  
Without thunderbolts i' the tail of them.

(I, ii, 177-178)

Not only do the brothers loose 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 idly shows 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 ta'en 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:

I do love these ancient ruins.  
 We never tread upon them but we set  
 Our foot upon some reverend history.  
 And questionless here in this open court  
 Which now lies naked to the injuries  
 Of stormy wrath, some men lie interred.

(V, iii, 9-14)

And, of course, some women lie there too, especially one who has already suffered the destructive power of the storm.

The themes of disease, decay, and poison are treated by all who have commented on Webster's language, for these reflect the tradition and mood he was supposed to create and follow. Two aspects of this theme are significantly absent from critical discussion, however, especially if one wants to consider more carefully Price's contention that the theme of the play is the conflict between appearance and reality. When the Cardinal unloads his heavy secret to his mistress, Julia, he makes her take a holy vow. Of all the appearances in the play, this is the most deceitful, for the sacred vow is a shield for murder.

Likewise, on the theme of disease, one specific note is struck which indicates something of the concern with appearances in the play. Many of the references to disease, especially the ones made by Bosola, are references to skin disease. Even in modern times, and certainly in Elizabethan times, blemishes of the skin are taken to be the outward show of inner corruption. In spite of the fact that the Cardinal and Ferdinand take as their excuse religion, propriety, and noble blood, the sickness of their insides will, at last, show itself. As the infection of their minds has affected others, so, in the final scenes, it will affect them, erupting to the completely discernible surfaces of their lives and actions.

The references to the dramatic art in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama have been exploited by theater historians to help them understand stage conventions and practices, but as important parts of the dramatic events involved they have often been overlooked. On the one hand, they would seem to be ostensible admissions that what is going on is only appearance, that the play is a play. On the other hand, such references often serve as reminders that "all the world's a stage", or that life itself has, at best, only the nature of appearance: "We are such stuff/As dreams are made of, and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep". No matter what interpretation one gives to such references to the drama, it is impossible to overlook them in *The Duchess of Malfi*, not because there are so many or because there is an extended discourse or scene in the play with drama as its major topic, as there is in *Hamlet*, for example, but because even a few references to the dramatic art are extremely noticeable. Perhaps we are impressed with the poet's daring in including

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 o'erladen 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/ /Is music to thee screech-owl" (III, ii, 89-90). The owl reappears in his 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. Parrott 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 "infinite mass 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-piety 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, 2-5)

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 that not worse that frights the silly birds  
Out of the corn, or that which 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 sterilitie can no more hurte me, but onely take from me the name of a father, or the dotynge pleasure to se my lytell sonne ryde on a cokhorse, or to here hymn chatter and speake like a wanton (Dent 1960:189).

Antonio gives the fled servants, too, a specific bird's name, while the source, *Philotimus*, refers only to birds. Antonio says, "But your wiser buntings/Now they are fledg'd, are gone" (III, v, 5-6). In *Philotimus*, the line reads, "Your friends be fledd. In deede you brought them well up till they were flidge, and therefore no maruaile though they bee flowne" (Dent 1960 : 220). In act three, scene five, the Duchess, wishing for death, compares her condition to "Pheasants, and Quailes, when they are not fat enough/To be eaten" (110-111). In *Arcadia*, the words are more general: "... (with the same pittie as folkes keepe foule, when they are not fatte inough for their eating)..." (Dent 1960 : 226). Finally, in act five, scene two, "Crowes, Dawes, and Sterlings" (31) replace the "sheepe" in the following quotation from *Arcadia*: "Eagles we see fly alone; and they are but sheepe, which alwaies 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 nightengale  
Never live long in cages.

(IV, ii, 14-16)

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 game,  
And let you fly at it.

(II, iv, 38-40)

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 turtle's feathers, whilst a guilty conscience

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

(IV, ii, 365-370)

In his use of bird imagery Webster seems to emphasize the concrete element of the conflict between the lovers and their foes. Although it is the "fatal bellman" rather than "Fate" or "fatalism" that he signifies. The conflict of interests ends in tragedy, as it must, for the brothers cannot be swerved from their greedy purpose, and the lovers cannot be separated.

I do not wish to suggest that the imagery in Webster is a powerful unifying element in his drama, although it cannot help but serve that function to some degree. In spite of the carefully reiterated themes, *The duchess of Malfi* and *The white devil* continue to sprawl over much territory, much time, and many pages.

What I have hoped to prove, however, is that the imagery in the best tragedy by Webster is rather traditional, that it is thematic as well as active, and that it is by no means an unimportant part of the play. There is here, as there often is in poetic drama, a single theme made explicit by one set of symbols, a theme which corresponds to the basic idea of the play. The employment of imagery here is certainly no more enterprising than Shakespeare's, but it is not significantly less so, either. Like Macbeth's "ill-fitting garments" and Hamlet's "rank gardens", the bird imagery in *The duchess of Malfi* indicates that the dramatist was poet as well as playwright, and was consciously aware of the power word pictures have in indicating some general idea of the drama.

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