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# Framing the Duchess: Webster and the Resources of Renaissance Art

> *Bossola,* a boxe that mariners keepe their compasse in. Also taken for the compasse. *Bossolare,* to put in a boxe.
> *Queen Anna's World of Words* (1598)

Perhaps more than any of his contemporary dramatists Webster seems to have responded actively to the representational opportunities offered by Renaissance art, and none of his plays show this willingness to engage with the sister arts more consistently than *The Duchess of Malfi.* But how exactly does Webster draw on the arts of his day? In this essay I wish to suggest that Webster systematically and with a clear design in mind transformed certain motifs and compositional techniques which had become standard ingredients in the Late Renaissance style of Mannerism. When the dramatist adapted the tragic events reported in the novellas of Bandello and Painter,[1] Mannerism largely had been supplanted by the Baroque on the Continent, but in England where a pragmatic syncretism existed with a particular blend of old and new, native and continental,[2] only few experiments

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[1] The source is Matteo Bandello's *Le Novelle* (1513), Novella XXVI, 'Il signor Antonio Bologna sposa la duchessa di Malfi e tutti dui sono ammazzati'. As documented by Gunnar Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge, N.J., 1962), Webster relied mainly on William Painter's translation in Book II of *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567) of Belleforest's expanded and moralised version (1565). In Painter the story figures as Novella XXIII.

[2] For English responses to Renaissance Style, see Alice T. Friedman, "Did English Have a Renaissance: Classical abs Anticlassical Themes in Elizabethan Culture", in eds. Susan J. Barnes and Walter S. Malion, *Cultural Identity in the Visual Arta* (Hannover and London: National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1989), pp. 93-111.

in Baroque style were seen.[1] Thus Mannerism as a style is sometimes evoked in criticism of Webster's play.[2] I here especially wish to refer to the style's final phase, *maniera manierismo*. This is *a style* which in its paintings display crowded surfaces where within less than perfectly balanced frameworks, figures are combined in groupings marked by abrupt and unexpected shifts of perspective and lighting[3] - elements we immediately react to in the "impure art" of Webster.[4]

The title of this essay "Framing the Duchess," alludes to the important term "frame" in three different but not unrelated senses: First, I employ it in the Albertian sense about the artificial frame he posited around the *historia* of a painting, when codifying the rules of perspective. Secondly, I use frame in the Old English sense, where it 'generally denoted an underlying structure that upheld or shaped an object or idea.'[5] To frame in the Renaissance therefore meant to compose, as when framing a poem or a letter. Thirdly, I use the term in the modem sense of entrapment, as in to frame the Duchess. All these senses come together in Webster's design for the play, not least through the actions of the archframer, Bosola, who entraps, murders, and finally avenges the Duchess. Like the figure often found in the foreground of many Renaissance paintings, he hovers in the liminal zone between the spectators and the action, being the character who also most frequently uses the aside. But now let us turn to Webster's chiaro-scuro plotting.

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[1] Graham Parry, "Experimenting with the Baroque at the Court of Charles I", in ed. Roy Eriksen, *Contexts of Baroque: Theatre, Metamorphosis, and Design* (Oslo: Novus, 1996), pp. 173-84.

[2] Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Art: Transformations in Art and Literature 1400-1700* (Garden City, N. Y., 1955), pp. 103, 123, 177.

[3] See e.g. James Mirollo, *Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry. Concept, Mode, Inner Design.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984.

[4] See e.g., Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster", *RES* n.s. vol. IX (1958), pp. 253-67.

[5] *Shakespeare's Patterns of Self-Recognition.* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1972), p. 42

Jacqueline Pearson has compiled a list which in addition to references to dramatic arts like tragedy (IV.2.8) and the masque (IV.2.105), contains passages on "[m]usic, 'feign'd statues' (IV.2.351), funerary sculpture, portraiture, perspective painting (IV.2.358)".[1] To the list we may also add engraving (I.i.18889), jewellery, wax work, and civic and military architecture (III.v.10 and IV.ii.219-22; 232-33). In addition to displaying this generic awareness and variety, *The Duchess of Malfi* from beginning to end teases us by presenting us with characters, events and imagery which elicit contrary responses. Repeatedly we are offered images which stress the need for a fixed centre and rigid control, whereas the subsequent metamorphosis of these images show that certainty of perception within a stable frame is illusory and even impossible. This dialectic of fixity and flux is expressed most notably in Webster's well-nigh obsessive preoccupation with "optical instruments, optical devices, shadows, mirrors and reflections of all sorts",[2] what the dramatist himself terms "perspective art" in *The White Devil* (I.ii.100). In fact, the play presents us with two basic varieties of perspective: first the kind that sees perspective as a mathematically devised system to map and control the representation of reality, which is more readily associated with Leon Battista Alberti's *Trattato della pittura* (1435).[3] The other variety sees perspective as a fiction of reality, defining it as "a kind of cousning or cheating your owne Eye, by your owne consent and assistance".[4] The latter notion was established already in the fifteenth century with a theorist like Filarete.[5]

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[1] Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedy in the Plays of John Webster* (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1980).

[2] Paganelli, Eloisa, "'A Miserable Knowledge of the Small Compass of our Prison': Shifting Perspectives in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*", in eds. Paola Bottalla and Michela Calderaro, *Counting and Recounting. Measuring Inner and Outer Space in the Renaissance*, p. 151

[3] See ed. Cecil Grayson, *The Art of Painting* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

[4] Cited from E. Norgate, *Miniatura* (c. 1625; rev. 1649).

[5] "Tu potrai dire: questa [prospettiva] è falsa che ti dimostra una cosa che non è." ("You can say that [...] is false, for it shows you a thing that is not." ) Antonio di Piero Averlino [Il Filarete], *Trattato dell 'Architettura*, 1464, libro xxiii.

While the first variety entails precise rigidity and abstraction, the second variety is the source of illusionist and trompe l'oeil-art, and both are present in *The Duchess of Malfi.*

Like many of his contemporaries, Webster appears to have been fascinated by the "curious" art of orthogonal representation which gave to the Renaissance an exhilarating sense of control and power over the represented natural world. In England that sense is celebrated in Haydock's *The Curious Art of Painting* (1598), a translation of Paolo Lomazzo's treatise. Part of its fascination arises from the paradox that central perspective organises the field of vision around an ever-receding single point on the horizon, the so-termed vanishing-point, while "a frame asserts the autonomy of the fictional space, affirming its otherness."[1] Applied to the character of the Duchess, one may say that the more she is contained and framed in the physical sense, the more she resists being controlled and retains her moral and personal integrity. To the last she insists on being "the Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.i. 141), here with a possible pun on "still" in the sense of "constant," "unmoved". The element of change inherent in the failure to control her, she dazzles the eye even in dead, also extends to motifs and metaphors which Webster fetched from Mannerist art. In keeping with Mannerism's preoccupation with metamorphosis and paradox, these motifs are transformed before our very eyes into haunting examples of Angst mannerist colouring.

The Arragonian siblings are traditionally considered the tragedy's chief antagonists, which of course is a fair assessment, but as I read the play the Duchess and Bosola occupy these roles. From his single appearance as "capitan Daniele de Bozolo" in Bandello's novella, one among many cut-throats, and his similarly brief inclusion as "this bloudy beast ... Daniel de Bozola" in Painter's expanded translation,

[1] S.K. Heninger, Jr., *The Subtext of Form in the English Renaissance: Proportion Poeticall* (University Park: Penn State Press), p. 167.

Webster slightly, but significantly, changes his name to "Daniel de Bosola", developing him from an occasional hired murderer into becoming a "free" agent who eventually decides the outcome of the play.

Bosola is indeed central to the action throughout, but it is the Duchess's decision to marry one of her subjects, changing dynastic for domestic concerns, that sets the plot going. Her powerful brothers, the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand, demand that she remain unwed in the role as a patient and grieving widow, while she on the other hand is sexually unfulfilled, desiring human affection and physical love. She therefore neglects her brothers' threats, boldly confessing her longings to Antonio Bologna, the Steward of the Household, and the object of her desires:

> ... this is flesh, and blood, sir,
> 'Tis not the figure cut in Alabaster
> Kneels at my husband's tomb. (I.i.452-54)

Her positions as a monarch and woman, cause her "two bodies" to be at variance, because she is locked in a dynastic triple-bind with Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Antonio describes their dangerous interdependence in terms of a triptych medal in the opening scene:

> You never fixed your eye on three fairer medals,
> Cast in one figure, of so different temper. (I.i.188-89)

Such emblematic artefacts were used to signal the power and prudence of the persons to which they belonged in the Renaissance. Eloisa Paganelli briefly mentions this "unusual family triptych, which in a baroque visual image condenses the paradoxical coincidence of opposites",[1] illustrating her analysis with paintings by Titian, Lotto, and Van Dyke. Titian's

[1] Paganelli, p. 152.

painting, *An Allegory of Prudence* (1566), which probably is a portrait of the painter himself, his son, and a distant relative,[1] is unique in its kind, but draws in its secondary iconography, three animal heads, on a well-established Christian tradition. Paganelli does not, however, fully take into account the convention of combining three heads or figures as an allegory of prudence, but uses Antonio's description as the startingpoint for a discussion the Arragonian brothers and the sister in terms of the literary double, or the *doppeltgänger*.[2] The image is indeed intriguing, but I think the context offered in the quotation itself, that of the portrait or emblematic medal, is closer to how it is applied in the play.

Edgar Wind discusses the interlocking and interdependent qualities signalled by such medals in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*,[3] where he in particular discusses the emblematic function of the Three Graces as embodying complementary qualities in the Neo-Platonic philosophy of love.[4] Hence, if one aspect came to dominate in or were to disappear from the configuration, the resulting imbalance would undo all. Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* (1585) naturalised this Neo-Platonic symbolism to Elizabethan writers, stressing Paris's imprudence in choosing one of the goddesses.[5] In Webster's play Antonio occupies Paris's role when he imprudently accepts the Duchess's offer of love, thus severing the unity of the "three fairer medals,/Cast in one figure, of so different temper." A reference to Paris later in the play confirms this interpretation. On listening to Antonio's dismissive remarks on Daphne, Syrinx, and Anaxarete who all escaped

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[1] Ed. Harold E. Wethey, *The Portraits of Titian. Complete Edition*, 3 vols (London: Phaidon, 1971), II: 50.
[2] Paganelli, pp. 152ff.
[3] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 31-56.
[4] An inscription like PULCHRITDO-AMOR-VOLUPTAS on a medal would be interpreted as "Amor starts from Pulchritudo and ends in Voluptas;" cf. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance. p.* 50.
[5] *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance.* p. 162

from love (m.ii.25-28), Cariola casts herself in the role of a female Paris and seeks Antonio's advice:

> This is vain poetry: but I pray you tell me,
> If there were propos'd me, wisdom, riches, and beauty,
> In three several young men, which should I choose? (33-55)

Interestingly, Antonio now finds this "a hard question", offering an answer that fully documents his inability to be a prudent judge:

> this was Paris' case
> And he was *blind* in's, and there was great cause;
> For how was's possible he could judge right,
> Having three amorous goddesses in view,
> And they *stark* naked? (36-40)

His answer echoes Antonio's words in the wooing scene, when offered beauty and riches: "You have made me *stark blind*" (I.i.410). The repetition of words hardly is coincidental, telling us that Antonio is an imprudent man who is dazzled by exterior qualities.

The notion of the Arragonian siblings as a mutually interdependent group also surfaces when Ferdinand has learnt about their sister's secret marriage and confesses that:

> ... I could kill her now, In you, or in myself, for I do think It
> is some sin in us, heaven cloth revenge by her. (II.v.62-66)

He here appears as an utterly destructive character, a trait which is not without resonance in his sister either, when she in Act Four alludes to the principle of three into one, wishing to "curse those smiling seasons of the year/Into a Russian winter, nay the world/To its first Chaos" (IV.i.96-98). The irony is that they all are to be re-united in the chill of death at the end of the play, having moved from the fictional stability depicted on

Antonio's medal via conflict and flux to fixity in death. The medal described by Antonio therefore appears to serve as an overture to the principle of artistic metamorphosis at work in the play. An equally grotesque, but perhaps even more significant metamorphosis involves the use of the Petrarchist image of the beloved's white hand, "that curious engine" (III.ii.295). As shown by James Mirollo the *bianca mano is* a conceit that elicited a variety of contrary responses in mannerist poetry and painting.[1] It here suffices to mention to Bronzino *Portrait of Laura Battiferri* and Parmigianino's *Portrait of a Young Woman,* both of which display long elegant hands. The hand of Laura Battiferri, who was a poet of some fame, rests on a copy of *II Canzoniere,* suggesting the identity between Laura in the work and the portrayed lady's white hand, *la bianca mano:*

> O belle man, che me destringi 'l core,
> e 'n poco spatio la mia vita chiudi;
> man ov'ogn' arte e tutti loro studi
> poser Natura e 'l Ciel per farsi honore (CIX, 1-4)
> (O beautiful hand that clasps my heart
> and encloses my life within a small space
> in which Nature and Heaven have demonstrated
> all their art and concern in order to honour themselves;...)

The link between "Nature e 'l Ciel," or the profane and the sacred, which is so prominent in Petrarch's sonnet became a topos in cinquecento art. The convention of presenting elongated and elegant hands was well known in England. A sketch by Isaac Oliver dating from 1586, *Lamentation on the Death of Christ,*[2] shows figures represented with slender and prominently displayed hands, thus bespeaking an awareness of

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[1] Mirollo, *Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry. Concept, Mode, Inner Design.*, pp. 125-59.
[2] Discussed by Friedman, "Did England Have a Renaissance? Classical and Anticlassical Themes in Elizabethan Culture", in eds. Susan J. Barnes and Walter S. Malion, *Cultural Identity in the Visual Arts* (Hannover and London: National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1989), pp. 93-11.

continental models. A telling example is, however, afforded by Nicholas Hillyard's painting *Portrait of a Youth*, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Here the sonnet lover is clasping a woman's hand which reaches down to him from a cloud as if to offer heavenly sustenance. Mirollo interprets the hand to be "rescuing the poet-lover from above, a symbol of amatory salvation of a valid instrument of the beloved's grace."[1] The iconography with its obvious reference to conventional representations of the hand of God as an instrument of judgement and the submissive role of the lover may also suggest that the lady is a potentially haughty and cruel lord, as in Petrarch's description of Love as a cruel deity and the lover as servant.

In Webster's play hands are given special attention on various occasions, first, when the Duchess elevates the kneeling Antonio:

> The goodly roof of yours is too low built;
> I cannot stand upright, nor discourse
> Without I raise it higher: raise yourself
> Or if you please, my *hand* to help you so.
> (I.i.415-19; italics added)

Here we have the beneficial hand that gives sustenance to the sonnet-lover in Hillyard's portrait. This is also how the Duchess shortly thereafter uses the image when she transforms herself into Antonio's good "Fortune": "I would have you lead Fortune by *the hand*/Unto your marriage bed" (495-96). However, with a stroke of genius Webster lets Bosola voice the full image when he in a later scene manages to entrap the Duchess. In imagery reminiscent of the wooing scene, he compliments both the virtue of Antonio and the power inherent in her hand:

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[1] *Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry.* pp. 149-150.

> Last, neglected poets of your time,
> In honour of this trophy of man [Antonio],
> Raised by that curious engine, *your white hand*,
> Shall thank you, in your grave, for't; and make that
> More reverend than all the cabinets
> Of living princes. (III.ii.293-96; italics added)

The ambiguous compliment focuses on the mannerist conceit, "that curious engine", the white hand, which the Duchess unlike Petrarch's lady has employed to honour her lover, not herself or the powers she represents (i.e. Natura e'l Ciel). We note that the hand is portrayed as an artefact to be venerated on a par with princes' cabinets. This ominous Petrarchan compliment causes her to confide in the duplicitous Bosola, and that even with a line that echoes his conceit: "Sir, your direction,/Shall lead me by *the hand*" (312-13; italics added). She is as naive at this point as is Antonio upon the couple's escape later on: "since we must part/Heaven hath *a hand* in it"; ... (III.v.61-62; italics added). Antonio subscribes to a providential interpretation of their misfortunes, whereas the Duchess later on seems more inclined to seeing the judgemental aspect: "O, heaven, thy *heavy hand is* in it" (III.ii.78; italics added). Inevitably, these are words which make us recall Bosola's line in the previous act: "And I will set my *hand* to it" (II.iii.41; italics added).[1]

Mirollo has argued that in the Petrarchist tradition the lady's white hand gradually assumes an emblematic function in which an entire amatory psychology and the corresponding aspects of the lady become compacted "into disembodied hands and gestures,"[2] Therefore the hand in art and poetry tended to be represented as isolated from "all personal and social contexts", as in Hillyard's *Portrait of a Youth.* Webster seizes on the negative aspect of this emblem, the lady's or Love's capacity to torment, driving it to its grotesque extreme, when

[1] Hands are also referred to at III.i.89, III.v.39-44, and IV.i.78-79.
[2] Mirollo, *Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry,* p. 148.

he makes Ferdinand present his twin sister with a wax replica of "a dead man's hand":

> Here's a hand
> To which you have wov'd much love; the ring upon't
> you gave. (IV.i.43-45)

With this waxen hand, mistook for a real hand, the metamorphosis of the mannerist conceit is complete: the powerful erotic image of the *bianca mano*, of "flesh and blood", has become utterly transmuted into the cold, disembodied hand given by Bosola in his attempt to make the Duchess go insane.

When the Duchess receives the wax-maker's artefact, she is already imprisoned like "a lark in a cage" (IV.ii.128-29), and her brothers' attempts to confine her have in one respect been successful. Their attempts to confine her also related to another set of images that developed from the opening scene of the play, one in which mechanics, persepective and optics are central ingredients. Significantly, Bosola gives the cue in this case, a character whose very name, Bosola, so John Florio explains, signifies "he [who] puts into a box" or simply the brass container for "a compass."[1] The idea of geometrical circumscription which was so essential to the Renaissance conquest of pictorial space, is present already in Bosola's description of how a maimed soldier's progress as "a kind of geometry" (I.i. 59-69). Antonio on the other hand presents another idea of framing in his introductory description of the Cardinal, the Duke, and the Duchess. The enamoured Antonio first dwells on the sinister characters of the two brothers, before he sings the Duchess's praises, concluding her "commendations" by a motto that "cas[es] the picture up" (I.i.207). "To case" here means both to

[1] Florio lists "bóssola", as "a boxe that mariners keepe their compasse in. Also taken for the compasse," wheras the verb "bóssolare", is given as "to put in a boxe". *Queen Anna's World of Words* (1598), p. 47.2c. We also note that Bosola twice is singled out as a "mariner": He has served in "the galleys" (I.i.34 and 214) and his very last word in the play is "voyage" (V.v. 105).

frame his encomiastic "picture" and to put it in a case, so that Antonio, too, could be said to foreshadow the future fate of the Duchess.

The master framer and "mathematical" malcontent, Bosola, is also the one to apply orthogonal optics directly to a woman, when he lewdly refers to "the mathematical trick how to make many lines meet in one centre" (II.ii.23) in a pornographic version of central perspective.

The Cardinal's disenchantment with women and disbelief in technical innovations at II.iv.16-20 contrasts with Antonio, who expresses an old fashioned belief by a modern metaphor:

> ... since we must part
> Heaven hath a hand in it; but no otherwise
> Than as some curious artist takes in sunder
> A clock when it is out of frame,
> To bring it in better order. (III.v.61-65)[1]

The difficulties of encompassing on the one hand and the refusal to accept being constrained are stressed throughout. Duke Ferdinand on the other hand stresses the difficulty of encompassing women when he desires "a mathematical instrument" for a woman's face "that she might not laugh out of compass" (I.i.136-37). Personally, however, he declares himself to be beyond control:

> He that can compass me, and know my drifts,
> May say he hath put a girdle 'bout the world' (III.i.84-85).

In this quest for freedom of action he is similar to his sister, who refuses to be "[o]f all princes of the world,/Be cas'd up, like a holy relic" (III.ii.137-39).

[1] The adjectival "curious" is ia word of honour used about Mannerist artifice, be it the "curious engine" of the lady's hand or painting, as in Haydock's translation of Paolo Lomazzo's *Trattato della pittura* (1584) as *The Art of Curious Painting* (1598).

In the end, however, the Duchess is "cas'd up" so Bosola can ask her whether she ever saw "a lark in a cage" (IV.i.128-29). Indeed, this is in a part of the play which displays a number of images of enclosure: lead wrapped around the heart, the grave, the prison, the heavens made of molten brass, etc. Paradoxically, the Duchess's spirit remains unperturbed by the prospect of death, opposing to the many images of containment employed by her brothers and Bosola, an image of extreme flexibility:

> I know death hath ten thousand several doors
> For men to take their exits; and 'tis found
> They go on such strange geometrical hinges,
> You may open them both ways: ... (IV.ii.219-22)

Her stoicism cannot, however, deny the fact of her death. The fact that she is strangled is also in keeping with the metaphors of containment, the cord of execution grotesquely continuing her persecutors' relentless work of constriction. Her kneeling pose in death (IV.ii.234) ironically recapitulates "the figure cut in alabaster/Kneels at my husband's tomb" (I.i.453-54).

In addition to the two metaphorical strands, focussed on metamorphosis and framing, Webster uses a perspectival type of plotting, seemingly in an attempt to combine the linearity of dramatic action with the spatiality and symmetry of architecture. In a classic analysis of the play, "Spatial Structure in *The Duchess of Malfi*", Una Ellis-Fermor attempts to analyse the play in terms of painting, as "a form which grows out of the relation of the masses".[1] She regards the play as "a grouping of moods, characters, forms of diction or of prosody" and looks for form in the interrelations of these. She comments on "certain related rhythms of the characters, such as would be given by our first impression of the potentially moving masses

[1] Ellis-Fermor, Una, "Spatial Structure in *The Duchess of Malfi*",*The Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation* (New York, 1958). p. 21.

of a picture." In her view the Duchess has a "luminous quality", whereas the Cardinal occupies "some centre of immobility". The reading is imaginative, but impressionistic, illustrating the difficulty of comparing the progressive and linear succession of events in drama to the orthogonally disposed planes of a painting. For neither does the Cardinal remain unmoved as if at "some centre of immobility" nor is he in control of the action. To the "still" Duchess belongs the function of a centre of immobility. The Cardinal is in control of himself and his rhetoric most of the time,[1] but he does change and is demonstrably shaken by the course of events. He does not accomplish his goals, a fact seen when he first fails to control his sister and later to conceal his complicity in her murder (V.ii).

Spatial form is indeed to be sought in "the relation of the masses" and in a play are the scenes with their groupings of characters and the speeches and movements they make. To Ben Jonson action in drama corresponds to place in a building, so that all actions of a play as written form a configuration of textual "places."[2] This way of thinking is more concrete, than the "moods, characters, forms of diction or of prosody" favoured by Ellis-Fermor, but it will allow us to look at a play in terms of spatial form.

*The Duchess of Malfi* has been criticised for having a weak centre, both structurally and morally. In opposition to such views I propose that the key to what I see as its well-planned structure we need to pay attention to precisely the centre and its function in relation to Renaissance notions of tragic structure. Cultural differences between Late Renaissance and modern notions of centrality may prevent us from seeing the obvious. Relying on Aristotle's *Poetics* critics like Castelvetro

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[1] His self-confidence and linguistic control appears perhaps best when he compares Julia to a tamed bird in II.iv.27-36, a speech which is rendered rigidly symmetrical by repetition of words and conceits.

[2] To Jonson action in drama or poetry corresponds to place in a building, so that the collective actions of a play as written or printed form a configuration of textual "places," or actions recorded in and confined to particular textual segments. See Ben Jonson, *Timber: or: Discoveries* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1976), p. 43.

and Robortello rehearsed the old formula of unity of action, as that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end ("totum verd est, quod principium, medium, atque finem habet"),[1] emphasing the crucial function of tragic reversal, the peripety, at the centre of the plot. In Webster's play that reversal occurs when the Duchess and her family are banished from Loretto (and the State of Ancona) and she is deprived of her dukedom and wedding ring. The scene is a short one, only consisting of forty-four lines, but Webster has developed it from a single line in the novella source, expanding it into a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* of great symbolic value.

Considering the eighteen scenes of the play, which report actions set at various locations and covering several years, we can hardly expect them to present the neat symmetries of architectural ground plots, although some English Renaissance plays display precisely such arrangements.[2] The disposition of the play's scenes neverteheless suggests some sense of a architectural design in two parts. What I take to be the pivotal centre-piece of this design, the Loretto-scene (III.iv), scene ten of a total of all eighteen (in *The First Quarto*), falls close to the textual centre, being preceded by 1504 lines and followed by 1350 lines. It opens with a brief dialogue between two pilgrims who expect to see the Cardinal "resign his ... hat" and his sister "pay her vow" (III.iv.1-7) at "the Shrine of our Lady of Loretto". This is then followed by the Cardinal's instalment in the habit of a soldier,

> *performed in delivering up his cross, hat, robes, and ring at the shrine, and investing him with sword, helmet, shield and spurs* (7.02-03).

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[1] *Francisci Robortelli ... in librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes* (Florentiae, 1558), p. 72.

[2] Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is perhaps the most striking example, see my "'What Place is This': Time and Place in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (B)", *Renaissance Drama*, XVI (1987), pp. 49-74.

Next arrive Antonio, the Duchess, and their children, who *'present themselves at the shrine'* (7.04-05). Once they have prayed, the Cardinal and the State of Ancona drive them away "*by form of a banishment in dumb-show*" (7.05). During this three-part ceremonial play-within-the-play a hymn celebrating the glory of the Cardinal (8-23) is being sung "*by divers Churchmen*" (7.08). Finally, all leave but the two Pilgrims who then comment on the witnessed spectacle. In fact, the First Pilgrim helps us to identify the scene as the peripety of the play, when he marvels at the "*strange turn of State!*" (24; italics added). In fact, the banishment of the Duchess must have been conceived as parallelling the delivering up and the donning of her brother's various insigniae (7.02-03). Rather than being a weak centre this is an immensly powerful one, due to the ironic clash between the hymn in praise of the Cardinal's martial prowess ("*Triumphant conquest crown thy head*") when he robs his defenceless sister of her title and insigniae at the shrine of the Madonna. The sequence of five elements may be represented as follows:

| The Pilgrims converse [1-7] | The resigning and coronation of the Cardinal | The duchess and her family pray at the shrine | The deposition and the banishment of the Duchess | The Pilgrims converse [24-44] |
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"Divers Churchmen" sing a ditty during the dumb shows [8-23]

This framed sequence where two dialogic parts enclose three mimes accompanied by a hymn and "very solem music", may also favourably be conceived as an orthogonally ordered painting: In the foreground we find the two Pilgrims who mediate between the onlookers and the *historia,* being our representatives in the scene. In the middle-ground we find a

sequence of events (the *historia*) of a kind often depicted in narrative painting, where the same figures appear several times as e.g. in Pontormo's paintings for the Camera Borgherini.[1] Finally, the shrine itself occupies the background, represented by the discovery space. Many in the audience must have been aware of the extraordinary importance and power of attributed to the Santa Casa, which is a relic in the form of a building, the Virgin's house, said to have flown miraculously through the air from Palestine. Hence the dramatist is careful to avoid criticism for popism by disclaiming that the ditty sung is by him (8-11), and by making the Pilgrims comment upon the injustice committed by the Pope and the Church (30-35).

At the centre of the play, therefore, there is a strongly charged open space, said to be the space in which the Incarnation had taken place,[2] and harbouring (at Loreto) a Black Madonna with Child.[3] It is against this symbolic backdrop Webster decides to present the ritual acts which lead to the martyrdom of the Duchess. Despite her refusal to be "cased up, like a holy relic" (III.ii. 139), she is turned into a secular analogue to the Mater Dolorosa. Nor does the dramatist limit himself to drawing on this symbolism, he also exploits the open nonverbal space as the point around to organise key-points in the play's tragic structure, virtually a dramatic vanishing-point. To support this claim is a network of actions and statements in the play which are echoed across its centrally placed peripety, so at to suggest a "perspectival" design of plot.

The outer perimeter of that design is marked in a thoroughly conventional manner when the beginning links up with the end: thus Delio, newly arrived, delivers the play's first speech to Antonio, and the same character, again newly

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[1] See Lew Andrew's discussion of this phenomenon in *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).
[2] See Florian Grimaldi, *Loreto. Basilica Santa Casa* (Bologna: Calderini, 1975), p. 115.
[3] The wooden sculpture made by an unknown Umbrian-Marchese artist in the fourteenth century was destroyed in a fire in 1921.

arrived, delivers its last speech (V.v. 109-121). The topic is Antonio and his aim is to establish Antonio's son "in's mother's rights", suggesting a new beginning while recalling the breach of those rights in the central scene. To connect the opening scene with the peripetal scene there is also the ring symbolism: "Who *took* the ring oftenest" (I.i.88), Ferdinand asks upon his first entry, and in the central scene we witness the dramatic removal the Duchess's wedding ring ("What was it with violence he *took*/Off her finger" [III.iv.36-37]).

The alignment of entire scenes across the play is without doubt his contrastive alignment of what I would term the "echo-scenes" (I.i.361506 and V.iii.1-58). The former is the wooing-scene which is executed as a variant of the *questioni d'amore,* a type of amorous game in dialogic form designed to reveal the beloved's character and sincerity in love. Webster creates a particular variant by interlacing questions and answers by way of rhetorical repetition termed gradatio (climax), which results when the final words of one interlocutor are repeated immediately by the other, as in the following exchange:

> *Ant.* What *good deed* shall I *first* remember? say.
> *Duch.* Begin with the *first good deed* began i'th'world
> After man's creation, the sacrament of marriage--
> I'd have you first provide for a good husband,
> Give him *all.*
> *Duch. All*?
> Ant. Yes, your excellent self.
> *Duch.In a winding sheet?*
> *Ant. In a couple.*
> Saint Winifred, that *were a strange will!*
> *Ant.' Twere strange* if there were no *will* in you
> To marry again. (I.i.384-92)

The echo figure here serves to underline their shared desire and how their words entangle before they leave for her

bedchamber to do so physically, thus presenting a prose version of the *Mannerist figura serpentinata.*

The same structure is repeated when Antonio in Act Five declares his determined will to return to Malfi, but here a sinister effect is produced:

> Ant. Echo, I will not talk with thee,
> For *thou art a dead thing.*
> *Echo. Thou art a dead thing.*
> *Ant.* My duchess is asleep now,
> And her little ones, I hope sweetly: O heaven,
> Shall I *never see her more?*
> *Echo. Never see her more.*
> *Ant.* I mark'd not one repetition of the echo
> But that: ... (37-42)

When we consider that the echo is thrown back from a "diseased" church, [a] piece of a cloister, which ... [g]ives the best echo that you ever heard (V.iii. 4-5), we can appreciate how Webster prepares for the later metamorphosis of the echo-figure, for in the wooing-scene the Duchess had told Antonio that "tis *the church*/That must *echo* this [marriage]" (I.i.492-93; italics added). The two echoscenes are also linked thematically in that both end on a note of unity and resolution. The Duchess stresses the lovers' "fixed wishes ... for now we are one", intending to oppose all attempts "to divide" them (I.i.489-91; 497). Not knowing that his wife is dead, Antonio is equally resolute when he says "I will not henceforth save myself by halves;/Lose all, or nothing." (V.iii.50-51).

Other scenes in the play are contrasted in similar fashion, but without equally elaborate systems of verbal repetition. Notable in this sense is the use of deception *in bono* practised by the Duchess and Antonio when she feigns sickness to conceal her pregnancy and shrieks of pain (II. i), which contrasts with the deception *in malo* to cover up of Ferdinand's madness (V.ii). In similar fashion Ferdinand's lie to the Duchess that he

does not doubt her virtue (III.i), equals his feigned friendship in a letter (III.v). On both occasions the false declarations of love and trust are followed by surprise visits into first her bedroom (III.v) and then her cell (IV.i).

What emerges from this set of correspondences between scenes is an impression that events proceed according to a predetermined plan, the effect being similar to that created e.g. by the "duplicate scenes" of Shakespeare's *Richard III*.[1] The play's hurly-burly of atrocities and deceit does indeed proceed according to a firmly controlled design, so as to make the distribution of its places of action reflect on a formal level what Inga-Stina Ewbank has termed, "Bosola's perspective view of human consciousness". In that vision good and bad deeds crystalise into a vision of hell,[2] "a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison" (4.2.132-33). When creating the dramatic equivalent to that vision, Webster did not only plot his play according to perspectival thinking, he also drew on the powerful resources made available by Late Renaissance art, and its capacity to transform the known into the unknown.

[1] See, ed. E.A. J. Honigmann, *Richard III* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 29-30.
[2] Ewbank, Inga-Stina, "Webster's Realism, or, 'A Cunning Piece Wrought Perspective'", in ed. Brian Morris, *John Webster* (London: Benn, 1970), p. 164.