I Account This World a Tedious Theatre: Foucauldian Theatricality and Female Subversion in Webster's The Duchess of Malfi

Samantha Snively

This research is a product of the graduate program in English at Andrews University. Find out more about the program.

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/honors

Recommended Citation
Snively, Samantha, "I Account This World a Tedious Theatre: Foucauldian Theatricality and Female Subversion in Webster's The Duchess of Malfi" (2013). Honors Theses. 75.
https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/honors/75
Thank you for your interest in the Andrews University Digital Library

Please honor the copyright of this document by not duplicating or distributing additional copies in any form without the author’s express written permission. Thanks for your cooperation.
“I account this world a tedious theatre”: Foucauldian Theatricality and Female Subversion in Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi

Samantha Snively

April 1, 2013

Advisor: Dr. L. Monique Pittman

Advisor Signature: __________________________

Department of English
Abstract for “I account this world a tedious theatre”: Foucauldian Theatricality and Female Subversion in Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi

The title character in John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi resists patriarchal authority by marrying against her brothers’ will, provoking a violent and repressive response from a state that embodies Michel Foucault’s “spectacle of the scaffold.” However, before her murder, the Duchess deconstructs the theatrical nature of her brothers’ power. By exposing it as dependent on theatrical deceptions, she destabilizes and invalidates their authority. Deploying a direct critique of her brothers’ power jeopardizes her own aristocratic identity, and thus the speech and actions of the servant Cariola complement the Duchess’s internal critique with an external condemnation from a lower-class perspective.
"I account this world a tedious theatre”: Foucauldian Theatricality
and Female Subversion in Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi

Just before she dies, the Duchess laments, “I account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do
play a part in’t ‘gainst my will” (4.1.81-82). Arguably John Webster’s finest and most incisive tragedy,
The Duchess of Malfi (1623) exhibits an incredible awareness of its own theatricality. The characters in
the play break the fourth wall multiple times to comment upon the nature of self and the paradoxes
of morality in a social context, and theatrical metaphors fill their language. Recent criticism has
focused on the space between reality and representation where Webster troubles existing ideologies
and dominant discourses. This exploration of ideology combined with the play’s obsession with
power and domination make Webster’s tragedy a prime candidate for an application of twentieth-
century philosophy and criticism. Because Malfi’s plot so heavily features manifestations of power
and power struggles, Michel Foucault’s discussion of violence and power has informed a number of
recent explorations of the play. The plot of The Duchess of Malfi is exactly the type of situation
Foucault discusses in his “Spectacle of the Scaffold” chapter in Discipline and Punish: a patriarchal,
absolute state perceives an offense against itself and endeavors to rectify it through violent means.
Karin Coddon and a handful of other scholars have acknowledged the merits of a fuller application
of Foucault’s theories; Coddon writes, “the proposition that Webster seems to be implying is
striking: …theatre is but one public manifestation (executions would be another) of the violence
monopolized by tyrannical power” (41). Foucault’s spectacle of the scaffold haunts and informs
these articles: Andrea Henderson’s discussion of Malfi’s antitheatricality is “indebted to Foucauldian
ideas about the spectacle of power being the enactment of power itself” (76). However, few
discussions have yet to apply fully Foucault’s theories to Webster’s text. The Duchess’s Aragonian
brothers certainly deploy the spectacle of the scaffold, but what are the implications of that manifestation of power? Is not their power at risk precisely because it rests on devices shown to be dissimulating? An application of Foucault along these lines can contribute to critical discussions of the ontology of power as well as a greater understanding of the political and ideological function and radical nature of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

The antitheatricality pamphlets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries pinpoint these anxieties about the risks and vulnerabilities of deploying theatrical means to support power. With the emergence of the public theater in London came a flurry of pamphlets promoting the theater’s social and intellectual benefits, and a hailstorm of pamphlets disparaging the menace of “Playes.” An examination of these pamphlets reveals how Webster and his contemporaries would have conceived of the function of the theater and its relationship to power structures. Even in their moment, Elizabethan and Jacobean plays served to combat dominant ideologies. Jonathan Dollimore writes in _Radical Tragedy_ that in addition to “undermin[ing] religious orthodoxy,” early modern drama “generated other, equally important subversive preoccupations—namely a critique of ideology, the demystification of political and power relations, and the decentring of ‘man’” (4).1 A number of these pamphlets assert that the stage, as the mirror of action, has power to expose corruption simply through its reliance on the representation—or deception, as theater’s detractors labeled it—inherent in theatricality. The notion of theater as the great revealer appears in _The Duchess of Malfi_, and theater’s potentially threatening relationship to dominant power structures provides a foundation for Webster’s characters to explore their own relation to power. However, the same mechanisms that can reveal corruption can also, as opponents of the theater insist, propagate falsehood. The act of representation means always becoming a different self; costuming requires wearing clothes not your

---

1 This threat to dominant order, Dollimore argues, is further “evidenced by the fact of their censorship” (23). The vitriol of any antitheatrical pamphlet serves as a demonstration of just how much power the theater could wield and how much fear and anxiety it could provoke.
own; and even the limited hours of a play means selection of personality and a choice of what to portray for certain effect.

Antitheatrical writers invoked Biblical injunction against this pretending or evasion of complete truth that was, for them, effectively falsehood. They express a further anxiety about the corrupting effects this played falsehood could have on the audience: tragedies brought about hysterical “womanish weeping,” and comedies introduced “Italian bauderie” to the English people (Gosson, D2r). Those who wrote against the theater also used misogyny and racism to support their arguments, thus tightening the circle of the theater against the Renaissance “other.” This gendering and ethnicizing of the evil of plays corresponds to the larger institutions of power practicing real exclusion of ethnic others and women. Dympna Callaghan and Christy Desmet write of the pervasive rhetoric of the Renaissance Woman Controversy, which manifests itself everywhere from religious tracts to antitheatricality pamphlets. This printed vitriol against women signified actual misogyny and marginalization: “this game, this wordplay, this endless rhetoric, has immeasurable material impact on the lives of real women,” Callaghan writes (Desmet 57). In the endless barrage of prejudice and the ever-present attempt to keep women silent, chaste, and obedient, how were early modern women to resist this institutionalized marginalization?

Foucault’s theories of theatrical support for power, echoed in the antitheatricality pamphlets of Webster’s day, provide not only a deeper understanding of the ontology of power as Webster understood it, but also allow for a discussion of female resistance to and subversion of that power. Foucault writes that the spectacle of the scaffold was not always successful: inherent in power’s reliance on the theater lies a possibility that it can be exposed as nothing more than theatrical posturing. The women in Webster’s text capitalize on this weakness in one of the few forms of

2 The anonymous author I.G. writes along these lines in his *A Refutation of the Apology for Actors*: “…before the Conquest by Bastard William that the French came in, our English tongue was most perfect, able to expresse any Hebruisme, which is the tryall of perfection in Languages” (F2r).
resistance available to them, and together provide a critique of the corrupt Aragonian state from within and without. If, as Foucault argues, these theatrical manifestations of power are pervasive, and they are evident in Webster’s tragedy, what means are left to the characters to resist them? On the surface, the Duchess’s response to her torture appears passive, cast in the tradition of saintly martyrdom (Solga 100). Rather than attempt to ask for justice or bargain her way to freedom, she seems to acquiesce to the horrors acted upon her. Scholars and critics—mostly male—have lauded her stoic resignation even unto death for four hundred years. The Duchess’s martyred resistance contrasts sharply with her servant Cariola’s more emotional response to her impending death.

Comparing Cariola with the shining exemplar of the Duchess, scholars and critics dismiss her actions: “Her hysterical reaction to her impending death may be very human, but it scarcely inspires confidence in her judgment, particularly since it contrasts so markedly with the Duchess’s transcendent serenity,” writes Leah Marcus, expressing the predominant sentiment in discussions of Cariola (107).¹ In continuing to express approbation for the Duchess’s stoicism and censure for Cariola’s more common and expected reaction to her approaching murder, these readings still manifest a residual conception of male standards of behavior as normative. The stoic bravery the Duchess exhibits has typically been identified as a masculine trait, found in Homeric warriors who repress emotional outburst and display incredible control when confronted with mortality. Thus, even female scholars code the Duchess’s noble acquiescence to her murder as acceptable and even praiseworthy, while denouncing Cariola’s justifiable terror as, tellingly, “hysterical.”

¹ Marcus’ statement is perhaps the most direct assertion, although other scholars make similar assertions. R.S. White identifies argues that “the desperate attempts of the maid Cariola to avoid death are presented as rather frenetic and undignified” (206). Theodora Jankowski notes “That she [the Duchess] is shown not to cry out or beg for mercy places her at a moral advantage over Cariola, who is represented as begging for mercy” (97). Mary Beth Rose notes simply that “Cariola provides a foil to the Duchess’s heroism by begging for her life” (135). Notably, White, Marcus, Jankowski, and Rose all arrive at their characterizations of Cariola by contrasting her actions with the Duchess’s.
But what if Cariola’s actions were not simply hysteria and a reaction to watching her mistress murdered in front of her, but rather a vital component of female resistance to Foucauldian power? Christina Luckyj’s alternate reading of the Cardinal’s mistress Julia provides precedent for a more positive reading of Cariola (Luckyj 1987). Webster considerably expands Cariola’s dialogue from his source text, William Painter’s The Palace of Pleasure, suggesting a deliberate move to give Cariola a function more than simply stock servant or choric figure. Cariola’s actions possess greater significance because they form the complimentary half of the Duchess’s words leading up to her death.

Because the Duchess maintains her identity as part of the ruling class until she dies, one avenue of resistance is closed to her. As a member of the Aragonian state, the very institution asserting its power over and upon her, she cannot critique the justice of the state or its right to hold power, for doing so would destabilize her own identity. The Duchess resorts to much subtler methods of resistance, providing an internal critique of the state that reveals its corruption and hollow claims to power through the mendacity of theatrical practices. Cariola’s resistance, previously overlooked, supplements the Duchess’s resistance by providing an external critique from the perspective of a marginalized servant figure. As recent feminist scholarship has shown, an analysis of these women can provide greater scope to the ever more inclusive critical examination of all women in texts. Cariola warrants examination precisely because of her pairing with the Duchess, and this pairing in the play leads to a pairing of female resistance to power that uses the women’s social standing as an advantage to mount a more complete critique of the Foucauldian power of the Duchess’s brothers.

**Plays and Power: The Antitheatrical Debate**

The Elizabethan and Jacobean antitheatricality pamphlets can provide a glimpse of Webster’s understanding of the role of theater and its relation to power structures and the populace.
The pamphlets articulate fears about the subversive potential of theater and voice the theater’s defense. The source of anxiety for many antitheatricality writers, and one of the theater’s best merits to those who supported it, was the effect of representing the powerful onstage. Never quite sure of the strength of their own arguments, these pamphlets often use essentially the same argument for different ends. Nonetheless, these multifarious arguments all suggest the same principle: that theater has the ability to interrogate people and institutions in control, and in doing so, can append its own characteristics onto the structures it represents, thereby threatening to expose power’s manufactured nature. In a war of antitheatricality pamphlets beginning about 1570 and extending nearly into the 1640s, prominent writers, actors, and thinkers of the day alternately denounced and extolled the theater. The existence of the theater threatened the still-prevailing notion of the Great Chain of Being and served as a medium for the introduction of immorality into the populace. Within the circle of the theater, every social class mixed, and the dense mass of the audience made the theater a perfect haunt for whores, pickpockets, and other unsavory elements (Orgel 8). Because performances were often during the workday, the theater’s audience potentially contained many shirkers; and the great popular support the theater gained presented the possibility that plays would prove more attractive than Protestant church services, now devoid of Catholic pageantry. Furthermore, plays’ subjects were not always morally uplifting: one anonymous writer, I.G., rails that plays are “full of idle and vaine words…and full of Scurility” (G3v-G4r). But by far the most common anxieties about the theater were those concerning the representational nature of drama. In the body of the actor, truth hid under a number of changeable costumes. An actor of the lowest classes of society could dress the part of a king; a boy actor could quite convincingly play a woman,

---

4 I am indebted for these ideas to the lectures of Dr. Pittman’s Shakespeare Seminar, which provided me with extensive background for the antitheatricality debates. This section is drawn from the notes on Twelfth Night, 24 September 2012.

5 When quoting from the antitheatricality pamphlets, I have kept the original spelling but taken the liberty of regularizing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century print conventions.
eliding divisions of gender and confusing rigid class distinctions. Playing a monarch or noble in the theater suggested to the audience that all the world might indeed be a stage: if a mere actor could convincingly look and sound like a king for a few hours, then a “real” king might also be presenting a part to the world (Pittman 1). The divinity of power came into question in the theater as plays threatened to expose power as an arbitrary feature of appearance and show (Guy 137). Additionally, the presentation of immoral acts on the stage made many writers uneasy. Although the theater could serve as a locus of moral instruction, there was the danger that at some point, Vice would be glorified rather than reproved. The popularity of the theater presented a venue for the dissemination of dangerous ideas about power to a large portion of the populace, and those involved in the antitheatricality debate sought either to suppress this criticism or defend the theatrical institution.

Supporters of Renaissance drama insist upon the ability of an act represented on stage to expose corruption in figures of power by displaying their lives in public, as a moral mirror of sorts for current monarchs and nobles.6 Thomas Heywood’s An Apology for Actors (1612) uses the muse Melpomene to posit the theater as the great revealer of corruption in figures of power:

That held in awe the tyrants of the world,

And playde their lives in publicke Theaters,

Making them feare to sinne, since fearless I

Prepar’d to wryte their lives in Crimson Inke

And act their shames in eye of all the world? (B2r).

---

6 The pamphlets include a number of secondary arguments as well: it seems that in trying to clear the theater of its shady reputation, supporters of the theater presented as many benefits of the dramatic arts as possible. Other arguments include the theater as a mechanism to teach the art of rhetoric and proper speech; comparisons with other occasions of pageants and Jubilee celebrations; the improvement of the English language as it is shaped through the iambic line; and the act of performance as a confidence booster. Interestingly, Heywood’s pamphlet also includes the argument of art for art’s sake: “God hath not enjoyned us to wear all our apparrell solely to defend the cold…God made us of earth, men; knowes our natures, dispositions and imperfections, and therefore hath limited us a tyme to rejoice, as hee hath enjoyned us a time to mourn for our transgressions” (C1v-C2r).
By presenting the actions of the court on the common stage, plays demystify the workings of power for the common people and serve as a warning to the mighty: be careful what you do in secret, for it may be played on the stage for all to see. Stephen Gosson, in his *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), quotes a statement by Thomas Lodge that plays are “the Schoolmistress of life, the looking glasse of manners; and the image of trueth” (Gosson C4r). Much like Hamlet’s dumb-show functions to reveal Claudius’ guilt, plays about past kings—or with characters thinly veiled as current ones—can question the backstage and inner-chamber workings of power. Gosson touches on this deconstructive potential in an offhand comment: most plays, he argues, are about “an amorous knight” who travels about, “encountring many a terrible monster made of broune paper” (C2r). Gosson means this to disparage and trivialize plays, but he has created an apt analogy for the potential of theater to reveal displays of power as flimsy. If the player-king isn’t to be feared, because the audience sees him as merely an actor in a brown paper crown, then the possibility becomes much greater that subjects will not fear or respect the real sovereign either. A show of monarchy on stage suggests the same theatrical qualities may be present in the actual monarch in the palace.

Many writers defending the theater present the theater’s capacity to work as a revelatory medium and serve as a check on tyrannical or corrupt authority as its greatest benefit to society. Heywood combines arguments for the moral example plays can provide with a consciousness of theater as the Great Revealer: “What can sooner print modesty in the soules of the wanton, then by discouering vnto them the monstrousnesse of their sin? It followes that we proue these exercises to haue beene the discouerers of many notorious murders, long concealed from the eyes of the world” (G1v). This warning serves equally as well for groundlings as for monarchs, who operate apart from the populace, behind closed doors in the many rooms and passages of castles and mansions (Perry and Walter 96). Lodge asserts that plays are the glass of behavior, in which “the corruption of manners is there revealed and accused,” but Gosson responds to this with an appeal to the
sacredness of private life and a fair trial for all. Plays are unjust, he asserts, because “no private mans
life ought to be brought into question & accused, but where hee may pleade in his owne defence and
have indifferent judges to determine the cause” (C4r). It is hard to imagine advocating an
opportunity for villains such as Webster’s Ferdinand or Shakespeare’s Richard III to plead their own
cause successfully, but a reversal of Gosson’s argument elicits this: plays thwart the endless self-
posturing of figures of power by not allowing them to justify their actions. Theater, as a revelatory
medium, may actually serve to improve the actions of those in power, as a check on their authority.

But how can theater reveal when it is inherently a disguising? Many of the attacks on early
modern theater expose plays as falsehood and invoke Biblical injunction against them. The very
heart of plays is their ability to represent without becoming: in the words of Webster’s Ferdinand,
actors “study to seem / the thing I am not” (2.5.62-3). The anonymous author I.G., in his Refutation
of the Apology for Actors (1615) reads this as deliberate falsehood, whereas supporters of the theater
found in this same studied representation the potential for deconstructing the mechanisms of power.
Gosson’s pamphlet also challenges Lodge’s notion that plays are images of truth, asserting that they
do not exactly replicate truth: “Plays are no Images of trueth, because sometime they had such
things as never were, sometime they runne upon truethes, but make them seeme longer, or shorter,
or greater, or lesse than they were” (D5r). In the act of manipulation necessary to represent
historical fact or narratives within the confines of the stage, Gosson and I.G. see deception and lie
rather than metatheatricality and deconstruction. Opponents of the theater locate plays’
insidiousness not just in their capacity to convince but in of their inclusion of partial truths.

While difficult to determine exactly how much of this debate Webster would have been
aware of, we know of his endorsement of at least one writer’s work. Thomas Heywood’s pamphlet
includes in the collection of dedicatory poems one by John Webster, to his “beloued friend Maister
Thomas Heywood.” The poem ends with an epithet summarizing Heywood’s argument that plays
serve as a check on the corrupt actions of the powerful: “Who dead would not be acted by their will, / It seemes such men haue acted their liues ill” (22). Placing Webster not only near but involved in this debate heightens the possibility that his own works absorbed many of these concerns about the power of the theater and deployed them to continue interrogating ideologies and investigating corrupt power.

The Scaffold, the Stage, and the State

Many of the Jacobean antitheatrical writers’ ideas about the relationship of theatrical representation to figures and structures of power recur and are elaborated upon in Michel Foucault’s 1975 work, Discipline and Punish. Foucault’s concept of the “spectacle of the scaffold” claims that grisly public executions were a vital component of the legal process throughout Europe and England in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. However, Foucault transforms the antitheatricality writers’ worries that the hollow posturing of power might be exposed through playacting into assertions that early modern monarchs relied on theatrical methods to reinforce their power. By combining public spectacle with astonishing displays of force, early modern rulers could create a demonstration that left no question in their subjects’ minds who was king. However, the theatrical quality of public executions presents a number of problems for the monarch who relies upon them to legitimize his power. The scaffold’s association with the mendacious nature of the theater coupled what was meant to be an irrefutable show of absolute power with an institution that was even in its time known for interrogating the conduct of powerful figures. Spectacles of the scaffold always held within them their own subversion and thus had to be carefully stage-managed in order to keep the mechanisms supporting the monarch from turning on him. The Elizabethan double meaning of “scaffold” further clouds this distinction: the word for the platform of execution was also a term for the stage, as evidenced in the first Chorus of William Shakespeare’s Henry V: “The flat unraised spirits [actors] that hath dar’d / On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth / So great an object”
(1.0.9-11). To Webster’s audience, scaffolds and stages shared many of the same properties and often fulfilled similar functions: they could support the king, such as the plays performed in the court of James I, or they could incite subversion and rebellion against the monarch, as in the case of the performance of Richard II sponsored by the Earl of Essex. In general, however, Foucault notes that public executions “belong, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested,” and their subversive power remains threatened but rarely utilized (47). At the opening of the play, the Duchess's brothers have constructed a state of the very kind Foucault describes, and represent patriarchal sovereignty in all its force. Their words teem with the language of torture as well as related discourses of wounded honor and restorative violence. When the brothers perceive an affront to their honor in the Duchess’s choice of marriage partner, their threats turn to actualized violence, and they fashion grotesque tortures that align with Foucault’s spectacle of the scaffold.

In discourse and in action, Ferdinand and the Cardinal exhibit the hallmarks of a Foucauldian state, and these tendencies to violent display become intensified when their honor and authority is directly challenged through their sister’s actions. The sixteenth-century state that Foucault describes necessarily is also a strongly patriarchal one. The concept of the absolute monarch that Foucault describes relies on an association with the husband as the head of the family: Catherine Belsey writes that “sovereignty in marriage precisely resembles sovereignty in the state, and both are absolute” (637). Mingling historical anxieties about the role of women in Elizabethan and Jacobean society with an assurance of their own absolute superiority, the Cardinal and Ferdinand’s first interaction with their sister the Duchess firmly establishes the Aragonian brothers as precisely the kind of state Foucault paints in “The Spectacle of the Scaffold.” Voicing Renaissance stereotypes of the “lusty widow,” the brothers forbid the Duchess to marry without their permission. Widows in early modern England were thought to be both sexually intemperate and,

---

because they often possessed a large inheritance, prey to fortune-seeking men looking for a quick enrichment of their own depleted fortunes. In five lines, the brothers concisely express these fears: they caution the Duchess to “let not youth, high promotion, eloquence…nor any thing without the addition, honor, / sway your high blood,” and Ferdinand adds that “they are most luxurious / Will wed twice” (1.1.288-290). Although he professes to be concerned for her virtue and their family honor, Ferdinand reveals his mercenary aspirations much later in the play: “I had a hope, / Had she continued widow, to have gained / an infinite mass of treasure by her death” (4.2.273-275).

Ferdinand’s concerns for family honor, maintenance of property, and obsessive policing of female virtue all align with some of the primary concerns of a self-perpetuating patriarchal state.

Even as the Duchess counters her brothers’ arguments, the language she uses to do so affirms the necessity of violence in supporting state power. To her brothers’ assumption that widows who remarry are by nature promiscuous she presents an exception: “Diamonds are of most value, / They say, that have passed through most jewelers’ hands” (1.1.292-293). Even in contradicting her brothers, the Duchess’s words introduce a concept of justified violence into her discourse. Diamonds must be cut from their natural state to be considered of worth, and each cut removes more of the natural material. A diamond that has passed through many jewelers’ hands, as the Duchess speaks of, has thus experienced repeated violations but is now considered worthy to be owned and displayed, thus warranting the violent process used in its creation. The Duchess’s metaphor combines discourses of violative processes with those of wealth, power, and show and suggests the necessity of violence in the creation of her own identity as a member of the ruling class.

9 Mary Beth Rose elaborates in “Heroics of Marriage in Renaissance Tragedy”: “The widow’s freedom constituted an anomaly that was difficult for Jacobean culture to absorb. On one hand, an independent woman running her own household presented a contradiction to English patriarchal ideology; on the other; a widow who did remarry was criticized as lustful and disloyal, particularly in the threat her remarriage posed to a family’s retention of property” (130).
Although she uses them to different ends, she articulates an ideology similar to her brothers’, in which violence is necessary to keep order and hierarchy intact.

This undertone of regulatory violence continues in the brothers’ admonishments, which quickly grow into threats administered primarily by Ferdinand. Although the Duchess may choose secretly to marry, he says, “Such weddings may more be properly said / To be executed than celebrated,” with an obvious threatening double meaning of “executed” (1.1.314-315). He then draws his father’s dagger and brandishes it at his sister, with the ominous “I’d be loath to see ‘t look rusty, ‘cause ‘twas his” (1.1.324-325). Not just a physical threat, Ferdinand’s dagger reminds the audience and the Duchess of the patriarchal system in which she will always be subject to the authority of her male guardians. Ferdinand’s professed reluctance to see his father’s instrument of power grow rusty indicates the violence provoked against those who transgress patriarchal order. Overtly, the dagger represents the use of violence in domination, but as a phallic symbol, it suggests the sexual domination and even incestuous tendencies of a patriarchy that fiercely desires to contain agency through any means necessary. The brothers, assured of their own authority, expect their threats to sufficiently cow the Duchess, but as soon as they exit, she reveals her determination to ignore their orders: “So I through frights and threatenings will assay / This dangerous venture. Let old wives report / I winked and chose a husband” (1.339-341). And so, it seems, she does; she marries her steward Antonio within the same scene, effectively giving him control over her agency and fortune. Although she professes not to fear her brothers’ threats, her nearly flippant tone

---

10 Would Webster’s audiences have considered the Duchess’s marriage a transgression against right order? Leah Marcus discusses this issue in her essay “The Duchess’s Marriage in Contemporary Contexts,” concluding that although her marriage would have been technically illegal by the marriage canons of 1604, Protestant English audiences would have seen that marriage as an act of resistance against the oppressive Catholic state of the Aragonian brothers and therefore not invalid. Audiences would have equated Ferdinand and the Cardinal with the Spanish Catholics, and the Duchess and Antonio’s marriage would read as “not a reckless and intemperate evasion of law but as a retreat into virtue,” away from Catholic corruption (114). Marcus also notes that in contemporary contexts, illegal or clandestine marriages were not punishable by death, and thus the Duchess’s unjust fate villainizes the brothers even more.
foreshadows what later proves to be a fatal miscalculation of the power of patriarchy and its willingness to wield violently that power. Her immediate disregard for her brothers’ authority and actions in direct opposition to their orders present the Duchess as a figure powerful enough to have agency of her own, and intent on expressing that agency.

The brothers’—and especially Ferdinand’s—responses upon learning of their sister’s transgressions demonstrate the levels of violence the state is willing to enact in order to maintain its dominion. Marcus asserts that even if the Duchess’s marriage would have been considered illegal to Jacobean audiences, it “was not ordinarily a crime that was punished with loss of life” (113). But Ferdinand’s first instinct is to cry for execution: he expresses a rage at his sister’s illicit marriage that invokes particularly gruesome forms of torture: hewing the Duchess to pieces, burning her alive, and boiling her children. Ferdinand’s violent lines indicate not only his association of torture with governmental power but also as a necessity to restore familial honor and authority:

Would I could be one,
That I might toss her palace ‘bout her ears,
Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads,
And lay her general territory as waste
As she hath done her honors (2.5.17-21).

In his landscaped innuendo, Ferdinand voices a connection between destruction of property and violation of sexuality that echoes a larger tendency in patriarchal negotiations to contain family lineage and status through an often incestuous possession of women’s sexuality. Frank S. Whigham notes that “the point of Ferdinand’s incestuous rage is not the achievement of sexual relations but the denial of institutional slippage through contaminating relations…her action is also threatening to Ferdinand because it suggests that the supposedly ontological class categories are brittle” (170).

---

12 For a complex reading of the relationship of incest, politics, and brother-sister relations, see Maureen Quilligan, *Incest and Agency* (2005).
Ferdinand in his fury can see no other recourse to restore disrupted authority except through the use of violence: “We must not now use balsamum, but fire, / The smarting cupping glass for that’s the mean / To purge infected blood, such blood as hers” (2.5.24-26). The images he uses are instruments of healing rather than torture, indicating further Ferdinand’s belief that the state’s authority has been injured and requires restorative measures to bring it back to its “right” condition.

At the close of the scene, the Duchess’s perceived transgressions against familial honor provoke violent punishment intended to restore authority: Ferdinand rages, “I’ll find scorpions to sting my whips / and fix her in a general eclipse” (2.5.78-79).

The psychological tortures that Ferdinand fashions deploy Foucauldian “spectacles of the scaffold,” and closely resemble forms and motives Foucault identifies in Jacobean practices of torture. Foucault’s definition of crimes that necessitate public execution contain in them an understanding of the sovereign’s personal revenge against the victim. Not only has the victim transgressed against the law, but also against the sovereign himself. A punishing sovereign must restore justice and address the personal attack the crime represents: “it requires that the king take revenge for an affront to his very person” (Foucault 48). Her brothers already perceive the Duchess’s actions as a direct attack on their honor and absolute authority, thereby necessitating the use of restorative violence according to Foucault’s model. Foucault goes on to assert that public executions reestablish sovereign power, and the ceremonies of public execution function as instances in which “a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted…. [Their] aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength” (48-49).

After placing his sister under house arrest, Ferdinand begins a systematic psychological torture, designed to “bring [the Duchess] to despair” (4.1.115). He first approaches his sister in the dark, and
presents her with a dead man’s hand, which he suggests to be Antonio’s. As the Duchess calls for lights, the curtain goes up on the second scene of his spectacle: “the artificial figures of Antonio and his children, appearing as if they were dead” (4.1.55). Both the dead man’s hand and the murdered children demonstrate the triumph of a patriarchal sovereign over expressions of personal agency. Jacobean torture and executions did not “re-establish justice, [they] reactivated power,” and Ferdinand’s wax figures certainly assert his power over the Duchess and the bodies of her family—and by extension, her own (49). In giving the Duchess her husband’s hand, Ferdinand symbolically annuls the Duchess’s marriage and destroys Antonio’s honor. The ring on the dead man’s hand directly references the Duchess’s presentation of her ring to Antonio before their marriage: “‘Twas my wedding ring, / And I did vow never to part with it / But to my second husband” (1.1.397-399). In removing this hand, Ferdinand declares the Duchess’s marriage invalid, because it goes against the will of the state. The dead man’s hand also chillingly connotes the executioner’s power to dismember an offender’s body, and alludes to another form of Jacobean torture: drawing and quartering. The sovereign was thus allowed to violate totally the subject’s distinct identity, reinforcing the power of the state over subjectivity. Ferdinand’s spectacle serves multiple purposes: it punishes the Duchess for her disobedience of his orders and reaffirms his right to exact retribution for his subjects’ perceived crimes. However, at the court of Malfi Ferdinand has no authoritative claim as ruler, and his brother even less: Ferdinand is Duke of Calabria, the Cardinal a leader of the church. The Duchess gained Malfi through marriage, and thus the authority her brothers exert is simply that of male aristocratic privilege rather than any political power.

**The Duchess Talks Back**

The Duchess begins to subvert Ferdinand’s claims to power by exposing the theatricality of his authority. Immediately following Ferdinand’s dumb-show, the Duchess states, “Persuade a wretch
that’s broke upon the wheel / To have all his bones new set, entreat him live / To be executed again. Who must dispatch me? / I account this world a tedious theater” (4.1.78-82). “This world,” the world of the ruling class, is one founded on oppressive shows of power that Andrea Henderson characterizes as “destructive of the development or expression of selfhood in those around them” (63). The aristocratic figures in the text utilize theatrical presentations to assert their power, and Henderson, like Foucault, sees “an equivalence between successful performance and domination” (62). The Duchess, imbricated in the world of dominant dramatics as a member of the ruling class herself, expresses her association of torture and theatricality in the lines above, referencing the imagery of the wheel and rack. By suggesting her brothers’ sovereignty to be dependent on these theatrical and violent displays, the Duchess exposes the fraudulent nature of their claims to power and thus the illegitimacy of their authority. Those who reveal the constructed nature of a state’s power claims present the possibility that a state’s subjects can disregard its power (Henderson 62-3). The Duchess, in unmasking her brothers’ reliance on deceptive assertions of power, simultaneously declares their power illegitimate and presents herself as a threat that must be contained.

However, the Duchess’s position in the Aragonian aristocracy leads her to express a belief in the correlation of heavenly punishment and moral improvement that authorizes the divine right of royalty. She asks, “Must I…account it praise to suffer tyranny?” but then realizes “And yet, O heaven, thy heavy hand is in ‘t!” using the metaphor of a little boy whipping his top to keep it straight: “naught made me e’er / Go right but heaven’s scourge stick” (3.5.74-79). The Duchess’s conception of divine punishment and correction is inherently violent: her use of “heaven’s scourge stick” alludes to Ferdinand’s earlier promise of scorpion-tipped whips and other beatings. Ultimately, she believes that heaven’s punishments are justified because they intend to correct wrong

---

13 See Foucault: “…the pains here below may also be counted as penitence and so alleviate the punishments of the beyond: God will not fail to take such a martyrdom [that of public execution] into account, providing it is borne with resignation” (46).
behavior. Theories of monarchy prevalent in the Elizabethan and Jacobean era suggested that even though the monarch was divinely chosen and ordained, she was accountable to divine law and judgment (Guy 130). Heavenly punishment returned not just commoners but rulers to divine commandment, and was therefore justified in its severity. But the divine prerogative to punish also extended to monarchs, as they were “God’s Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne” in the words of James I (Guy 114). Called to execute the will and commandments of God on earth, the state appropriates divine authority to sanction its corrective methods. In allowing for the possibility that her brothers’ tortures may actually be the will of God, the Duchess tacitly supports the divine right of sovereignty assumed by her brothers. Legitimizing her brothers’ power thus solidifies her own position as Duchess but denies her the possibility of overtly questioning the authority of the state in which her identity is founded. Her resistance must therefore question other aspects of her brothers’ authority.

Ferdinand attempts to contain the Duchess’s growing resistance through a final expression of sovereign power, execution, but she refuses to demonstrate the appropriate fear of death and thus does not allow her brothers to achieve dramatic mastery over her. Rather than express fright or revulsion, she begins to long for death: she instructs Bosola to tell her brothers, “I long to bleed: / It is some mercy when men kill with speed” (4.1.106-107). In asking for death to end her misery, the Duchess has already begun to neutralize execution as a weapon of the powerful. She continues this delegitimization by trivializing and then refusing to fear death. Bosola in the role of executioner enters immediately after the madmen leave, announcing, “I am come to make thy tomb” (4.2.109). Here, the Duchess begins to actively resist her role in the drama of execution, engaging in verbal sparring with Bosola. As he attempts to deny her selfhood, calling her “a box of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy….A little crudded milk,” the Duchess fights to maintain her identity and agency (4.2.118-119). She asserts: “I am Duchess of Malfi still,” a declaration which
demonstrates both her agency and her complicity as a member of the ruling class (4.2.134). Although she reminds Bosola of her status as a ruler, that same status denies her the opportunity to question the justice of the state she is a part of. Rather, she chooses to nullify the power expressed in execution in her banter with Bosola, making light of her own death and undermining her brothers’ efforts at domination. When Bosola ushers in the executioners as “a present from your princely brothers” and the final act in Ferdinand’s drama of death, the Duchess refuses to fear this state-sponsored execution (4.2.156). She rebukes Cariola for crying out by stating: “Peace, it affrights not me” (4.2.163). By refusing to play the role of compliant victim, the Duchess withdraws from the drama of death and, as Karen Cunningham writes, “endangers the stability of the structure and illusion of containment that trials and executions strive to represent” (211). Declining to participate in her assigned role, the Duchess also denies her brothers fulfillment of the role they play as authoritative sovereigns with the power to exercise the finality of death, and thus neutralizes the authority they attempt to wield.

The Duchess continues to subvert her brothers’ authority by trivializing death and asserting her own agency. Even as she faces death, her language reinforces an association of torture and displays of power, and thus her final assertion of identity both suggests her complicity with the violent state Foucault describes and limits her resistance to that authority. The fact that Bosola allows her to speak before her execution deviates from trends that Karen Cunningham has observed in contemporary literature to repress the criminal’s last words in an effort to suppress “unauthorized words [that] endanger the stability of the structure [of the sovereignty] and the illusion of containment that trials and executions strive to represent” (211). Bosola presents the cords that will

---

14 Cunningham goes on to argue that these spontaneous last words could become “authentic appeals to common humanity with a reality and language of their own. If the doomed figures touch the hearts of others…they imply alternative ways of viewing their deaths and destroy the sense of difference needed to justify their torture” (211). Arguably, the Duchess’s last conversation with Bosola has just that effect upon him: immediately following her death, he challenges Ferdinand with accusations of murdering not only the
strangle the Duchess, intending to frighten her. The Duchess reverses Bosola’s reasoning, stating that even pleasant methods of death would still kill her, and thus instruments of death should not inspire fear:

What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut
With diamonds? Or to be smothered
With cassia? Or to be shot to death with pearls?
I know death hath ten thousand several doors
For men to take their exits (4.2.206-210).

Her description of death utilizes both the language of theatricality and inherently violent metaphors to insistently link torture and power. The Duchess describes a series of luxury items that experience violation or violence as an originary moment and are signifiers of the wealthy and powerful. She has used the diamond metaphor previously, in 1.1.292-293, and deploys it again here. Cassia, a kind of cinnamon, is made from bark stripped from the tree and requires pressing to become a valuable spice. This method of extraction also alludes to another particularly gruesome form of torture, pressing. Pearls originate as an irritant that has penetrated the oyster’s shell, and once the pearl has been created, it is pried from within the oyster. The pearl metaphor thus consummately blends the multiple discourses of torture and violence, patriarchal and phallic penetration, and the creation of value and luxury goods. By acknowledging the violence inherent in representations of wealth and power, the Duchess indicates the violence that accompanies a patriarchal system. The language of lines 209 and 210 further expresses the theatricality of state executions: giving death doors through which to exit places execution as merely a stage effect that the sovereignty may use in their larger power plays. The Duchess concludes her speech by reversing her brothers’ objectives in her death. Where they had intended retribution, revenge, and reestablishment of their power, she welcomes Duchess, but also her innocent children. It is in this scene that he begins to make plans to exact revenge upon Ferdinand.
death as a gift, to remove her from her miserable life and send her to more pleasant realms: “Tell my brothers / That I perceive death, now I am well awake, / Best gift is they can give or I can take” (4.2.213-215). In her refusal to credit death any destructive capabilities, she renders her brothers’ claims to power impotent.

The Duchess’s final speech continues to subvert her brothers’ authority, through a reassertion of her agency and a denial of the divine right of sovereignty. The Duchess reasserts her own power and authority to command by weaving orders into her last words:

*Pull, and pull strongly*, for your able strength

Must pull down heaven upon me—

*Yet stay;* heaven gates are not so high arched

As princes’ palaces; they that enter there

Must go upon their knees. *Come, violent death.*

*Serve for mandragora to make me sleep!*

*Go tell* my brothers, when I am laid out,

They may then feed in quiet (4.2.220-227, emphasis added).

In the lines “heaven gates are not so high arched as princes’ palaces; they that enter there must go upon their knees,” the Duchess also reexamines her belief in the divine right of monarchy, asserting that earthly rulers still remain subject to the judgment of the divine. Because a divine figure authorized her brothers’ power, argues the Duchess, their power remains subject to the same divine authority. Although Ferdinand and the Cardinal exert the power of state unjustly, a higher moral authority will judge their actions, forcing those who abused their power to “go upon their knees.” In questioning some of the most fundamental validations of her brothers’ power, the Duchess has effectively trivialized and dismissed the power of death that her brothers command, and thus
rendered invalid and ineffective the power with which they wield death and the authority they suppose it gives them.

**Communities of Resistance: Cariola’s Critique**

Cariola’s death immediately following the Duchess’s has often been overlooked as a hysterical and foolish caricature of the Duchess’s stoic death (Lord 310).\(^\text{17}\) However, her lines and actions before her murder form the second half of a critique the Duchess began, and all the more necessary because Cariola’s lower-class perspective enacts forms of resistance not open to the Duchess. Cariola’s few spoken lines have often precluded her from much analysis as an important figure in the play, but her presence on stage throughout the play speaks to her importance in the female resistance demonstrated in 4.2. Cariola remains onstage for every major scene of the Duchess: her marriage, the bedroom scene with Antonio at 3.2, and her torture and imprisonment. Whigham notes that Cariola “aids in the duchess’s self-defining act [her marriage],” and “also embodies the collusive strength that female identity can acquire in an oppressively role-resisted society” (Whigham 172). Already paired in the play in their resistance against Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s patriarchal authority, their responses to death would also naturally be interdependent. Cariola chooses a more direct method of undermining the state’s authority; she questions all the aspects of the state that the Duchess, as a member of the ruling class, cannot, and vocalizes the injustices that the state has practiced upon herself and her mistress.

When Bosola turns to Cariola and gestures to the dead Duchess, she understands him instantly: “Oh, you are damned perpetually for this! My turn is next. / Is ‘t not so ordered?” (4.2.230-232). Unlike the Duchess who welcomes death as an escape from a troubling world, Cariola freely admits she is not prepared: “I will not die,” and then proceeds to ask for due process of law:

\(^{17}\) Joan M. Lord’s essay explores Cariola’s death as representative of a new attitude toward death, expressed in Montaigne’s early essays, one that moves “towards a fully spontaneous approach to death” (310).
“I will first come to my answer and know / How I have offended” (4.2.235-236). Cariola demands to receive the due process of law that has been denied the Duchess, a fact which Ferdinand calls attention to later in the scene: “Did any ceremonial form of law / Doom [the Duchess] to not-being? Did a complete jury / Deliver her convicti
on up i’ th’ court?” (4.2.290-293). Although the brothers utilize torture and executions as expressions of their power, they fail to implement the trial and formalized examination of evidence that Foucault classifies as part of the system of punishment. In denying Cariola a hearing, the brothers reveal the injustice of the judicial aberration that transforms the Duchess and Cariola’s deaths from public execution to murder, and further highlight the patriarchal violence enacted on the women. When Bosola refuses Cariola a hearing, she then insists she is engaged to a young gentleman. But a plea of engagement does not work on a state that has just finished murdering one of its own for the crime of marrying against their orders. Cariola then attempts to bargain for her freedom: “Let me but speak with the duke; I’ll discover / Treason to his person” (4.2.240-241). These are all delays to Bosola, who orders the executioners to dispatch her swiftly, attempting to silence her protests as Cunningham states that Jacobean executioners were wont to do. Since she has already called the justice of the state into question, Cariola can no longer be allowed to live. She then begins to resist physically her executioners: one of them exclaims, “She bites and scratches” (4.2.243). Cariola continues to try to evade death, now using her spiritual state to buy time: “If you kill me now, / I am damned; I have not been at confession / This two years” (4.2.244-245). Although it may only be a plea to avoid death, the state’s refusal to acknowledge such an important request demonstrates the lengths a patriarchal state will go to in order to silence voices that would expose their power as construction. Before Bosola orders her strangled, Cariola tries one last tactic, pleading her belly: “I am quick with child” (245). An odd claim in light of her earlier assertion that she will never marry, this last plea also fails to move her executioners, and they murder

---

19 Ferdinand uses this argument to keep Bosola complicit in the crime, but it also calls attention to the aberration in judicial process that characterized the Duchess’ execution and makes it a murder.
her. However, her much shorter and violent death highlights the severity of Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s injustices, including their attempts to silence those who dared question their authority. In showing the state’s demonstrations of power to be unjust and ruthless, Cariola too undermines the Aragonian brothers’ authority.

**Conclusion**

Power such as Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s may rest on constructed scaffolds of what Foucault calls the “ceremonies of power,” but such regimes of authority often have devastating material consequences (47). In the Duchess’s case, her resistance cannot save her from being murdered; many women in early modern plays mount similar critiques of state injustices and do not survive the fifth act. What purpose does articulating the performativity of power have when the state can still execute those who critique it? To say that a corrupt power can be subverted simply by calling attention to its constructed nature denies the reality that such regimes often violently suppress dissenters. Regardless of their theatrical ontology, structures of power still produce palpable effects. In the face of such force, verbal critiques of the state may seem futile, especially if they result in murders like those in *The Duchess of Malfi*’s Act 4. However, when Foucault identifies the purpose of spectacles of the scaffold he also suggests the mechanism for toppling the scaffold and eventually, the power it supports. “The ceremony of the public torture and execution displayed for all to see the power relation that gave his [the sovereign’s] force to the law,” Foucault writes, and critiques like the one the Duchess voices disrupt the smooth transference of power over a victim’s body to power over a kingdom (50). When she names her brothers’ seemingly divine right to torture and punish for what it is, theatrical performance and show, she exposes the ontological lack at the heart of their authority.  

21 Within the confines of the play, the Duchess speaks her critique to a nearly empty room; but each audience member hears her deconstruction of power. Additionally, one other person in the play hears her last words:
the eventual downfall of her brothers at the hands of Bosola, deeply moved by her final pleas and spurred to revenge. Most importantly, the audience hears the Duchess identify her brothers’ authority as performative and Cariola critique it as violent and unjust, and just as the antitheatricality writers feared, audience members internalize subversive ideas about the theatrical nature of power.

Bosola, who then embarks on a mission to avenge the Duchess’s murder and “correct” the wrongs of the stage.
Works Cited and Consulted


Gosson, Stephen. Playes Confuted in five Actions, Proving that they are not to be suffred in a Christian common weale, by the way both the Canils of Thomas Lodge, and the Play of Playes, written in their defence, and other objections of Players frendes, are truly set downe and directye answeread. London: Imprinted for Thomas Gosson dwelling in Pater noster row at the signe of the Sunne, [1582]. Early English Books Online. Web. 2 September 2012.


