John Webster and the Dead:
Reading the *Duchess of Malfi*'s Eschatology

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Il n'y a pas un moment de cette pièce de théâtre qui ne soit marqué par la tradition eschatologique. Les perspectives relatives à la fin de l'histoire sous-tendent les sombres incertitudes présentes dans la pièce. Une stratégie en trois étapes est nécessaire pour dégager la signification de la mort dans The Duchess of Malfi. Premièrement, nous devons examiner les multiples significations des références de Webster à la fin du monde, du point de vue de l'interaction entre les allusions ironiques et/ou sincères à l'eschatologie ; ce qui peut être fait le plus clairement par une comparaison avec les pièces eschatologiques précédentes, telles que The White Devil. Deuxièmement, l'eschatologie de Webster, qui se trouve au cœur du programme dramatique de la pièce The Duchess of Malfi, doit être considérée dans le contexte historique du discours eschatologique de l'époque. Enfin, à l'aide de ces observations, la source de la force tragique unique de Webster peut être retracée dans sa conception de l'ineffable jugement, en particulier à travers les images qu'il offre de la résurrection des morts, une des composantes fondamentales de la vision eschatologique de la pièce The Duchess of Malfi.

There is no playwright more at home with the dead than John Webster. The first impression, and often second and third, is of an imagination so morbid that it can barely address other realities than those of violence and death. Rupert Brooke ended his monograph on Webster with the conclusion: "A play of Webster's is full of the feverish and ghastly turmoil of a nest of maggots. Maggots are what the inhabitants of this universe most suggest and resemble... Human beings are writhing grubs in an immense night. And the night is without stars or moon."¹ The First World War at least tempered the shock and dismay that Webster's frankness about corpses and his unabashed concentration on the horrors of violence produced in earlier audiences. In 1927, F. L. Lucas made the point, regarding the severed hand of Antonio, that "too many of the present generation have stumbled about in the darkness

among month-old corpses on the battle-fields of France to be impressed by the falsetto uproar which this piece of 'business' occasioned in nineteenth century minds."² One can understand the frustration of the editor at the "falsetto uproar" of audiences and readers, for there is much in Webster that cannot be attributed to his fascination with death and the dead; it is an injustice to state, or to imply which is more often the case, that Webster's preoccupation with dead and dying things is the product of a diseased imagination. However, the fascination with death and the dead *is* uniquely central to Webster's drama. No doubt similar portrayals of violence can be found elsewhere, but not with the same unremitting intensity of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Despite Lucas's warning, criticism of Webster has remained more or less focused on the morbid dimension of his work.³ Nothing else in the plays demands such attention.

If anything has changed in the focus of Webster critics since the First World War, or indeed since the nineteenth century, it is a new appreciation for how thoroughly the obsession with death and the dead motivates all aspects of the dramas. The violence and degradation which were seen, in the nineteenth century, as a stage technique belonging to Webster, have in more recent readings become the very foundation of the plays. Dollimore neatly sums up the various positions that arise from this assumption:

Webster has typically been charged with two kinds of chaos, or wildness: aesthetic and moral, with the latter usually being seen to involve the former. Those who have leveled the charge have tended to assume (but only occasionally to argue) that great literature makes some kind of moral affirmation (content) inseparable from a certain kind of aesthetic coherence (form).⁴

The Duchess of Malfi fits neither category. Inside historical time, without the stability of final judgment as an interpretative frame, the direction of the play—even its basic sense—becomes vague and uncertain. But those who find in *The Duchess of Malfi* only fragmentary morbidity miss a crucial point: Webster's is not just a mortal imagination, but an eschatological one. He is a poet who cares as much, if not more, for the dead as for the dying. And the dead guide Webster's tragedy in a way unique to him, a way that can only be explicated by means of his complex eschatology.

Teasing out the meaning of the dead in *The Duchess of Malfi* requires a tripartite strategy. First, the polyvalent meanings of his direct references to the end of the world need to be examined in the light of their play between ironic and sincere allusions to eschatology, which can be most clearly seen in comparison to precedent eschatological dramas, including *The White Devil*. Second, the centrality of eschatology to Webster's dramatic programme in

The Duchess of Malfi must be considered within the historical context of early modern eschatological discourse. Last, with these grounds prepared, the source of Webster's unique tragic power can be traced to his conception of the ineffability of judgment, in particular through his imagery of the resurrection of the dead, the most important component in the eschatological vision of *The Duchess of Malfi*. There is no moment in this play not affected by eschatological tradition. Throughout the dark uncertainties of the piece runs the epiphenomenal expectation of the end of history.

1. Irony and Sincerity in Webster's Eschatology

By the time of the performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1614 there was already an extensive eschatological tradition in English theatre. The medieval mystery cycle plays had already worked out a vision of judgment in detail.⁵ There were other, more immediate, predecessors as well. Plays such as the *Second Maiden's Tragedy* and *The Widow's Tears* had used eschatological themes for dramatic effect only a few years earlier.⁶ Webster's less popular play, *The White Devil* of 1611, had clear overtones of the end of the world. Flamineo's fake resurrection in the final scene, after he has battled against an adulteress and a Moor, is both terrifying and comic: it is the resurrection and judgment played out by a devil as a cruel joke. Brachiano's death, which prefigures Flamineo's histrionics, takes so long that even the characters on stage can't believe it. The dullness of his multiple deaths and rebirths suggests parody. Yet when Brachiano's ghost appears to Flamineo, he brings with him the most potent symbol of the return of the magically transformed dead in Webster's body of work: "a pot of lilly-flowers with a scull int." (V.iv.117)⁷ *The White Devil* for the first time presents Webster's two-faced references to eschatology: ironic play with eschatological imagery is countered with representations of its power and truth.

The Duchess of Malfi shares fundamentally the same vision of the end of history as the earlier play, but the use of eschatology is both subtler and more all-consuming. *The Duchess of Malfi* refines the elements developed in *The White Devil*. At first, in the light of *The White Devil*, the severed hand of *The Duchess of Malfi* may seem positively tame from a theological point of view. These corpses do not, at least, come back to life in front of our eyes. The eschatological reference in regards to the faked corpses comes at the point of the Duchess' death.

BOSOLA. So pittie, would destroy pittie: her Eye opes,
And heaven in it, seemes to ope, (that late was shut)

To take me up to mercy.
 DUTCESSE. Antonio.
 BOSOLA. Yes (Madam) he is living,
 The dead bodies you saw, were but faign'd statues;
 He's reconcil'd to your brothers: the Pope hath wrought
 The attonement.
 DUTCESSE. Mercy. *She dies.* (IV.ii.334–40)

The Duchess dies on the word “Mercy,” but it is important to recognize the plethora of meanings the word could have, and the relationship of those meanings to the implication of God’s mercy in the final judgment. Her previous line seems to indicate that she believes she has woken up in heaven, and is seeing Antonio, who is, of course, not there yet. The mercy she sees then may be a description of Bosola’s words, a prayer for heavenly mercy at her own judgment, an offer of forgiveness for Bosola, or simply an exclamation. The undercurrents of irony are subtler here. The pope’s atonement, considering who his cardinals are, is hardly evidence for heavenly justice. The fact that Bosola is bringing her the news of the “resurrection” is also ironic, since he has been responsible for enacting the deceit. There is also the fact that he continues to lie all through his revelation of the deceit. The children are dead, and there has not been reconciliation between the brothers and Antonio. Within these ironies, however, Webster maintains a dramatic sense of the power of mercy and forgiveness. Indeed, without the Duchess’ craving for mercy, the terrible cruelty of the perversion of that mercy would not exist. There would be no honest emotion to subvert.

The same double nature in the relationship to the dead is evident in the famous “echo” scene and its play with the concept of the return of the dead which was such a central aspect of early modern eschatology, and will be discussed more thoroughly in the third part of this essay. Antonio and Delio find themselves nearby the Cardinal’s fortifications, where the duchess now lies. Antonio comments on the ruins:

ANTONIO. Some men lye Enter’d
 Lov’d the Church so well, and gave so largely to’t
 They thought it should have canopied their Bones
 Till Doomes-day: But all things have their end:
 Churches, and Citties (which have diseases like to men)
 Must have like death that we have.
 ECCHO (*from the Dutchesse Grave*). Like death that we have.
 DELIO. Now the Eccho hath caught you. (V.iii.14–20)

The echo proceeds to inform its auditors of all the information they do not have, and what course of action they should avoid.⁸ These prophecies literal-

ly come from beyond the grave, though they emerge always from Antonio's own mouth. Antonio cannot comprehend the meaning of his own words. In the end he cannot follow them either: "For to live thus, is not indeed to live: / It is a mockery and abuse of life" (V.iii.47–8).

In both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, characters are highly conscious of life after death, and in particular of the heavenly judgment that awaits them. In these moments, the epiphenomenal expectation of the end of the world that courses through both dramas surfaces in overt references. At Isabella's death, Giovanni has the following conversation with his uncle:

GIOVANNI. What do the dead do, uncle? Do they eate,
Heare musicke, goe a hunting, and bee merrie,
As wee that live?
FRANCISCO. No cose; they sleepe.
GIOVANNI. Lord, lord that I were dead,
I have not slept these six nights. When doe they wake?
FRANCISCO. When God shall please.
GIOVANNI. Good God let her sleepe ever.
(III.ii.319–25)

Vittoria will later try to stave off her brother's attack with a remembrance of the end of the world: "I prethee yet remember, / Millions are now in graves, which at last day / Like Mandrakes shall rise shrieking" (V. vi. 65–7). But it is the Cardinal, the most corrupt figure in Webster, who expresses the most certainty about the judgment awaiting him at the end of time: "And now, I pray, let me / Be layd by, and never thought of" (V.v.88–9).

The eschatological vision alters irrevocably all images of death and of the dead here; and, given the wealth of such references, the uncertainty motivated by the duality of Webster's perspective bleeds into the rest of the work. Travis Bogard is precisely wrong when he writes that in Webster's plays,

Death is clearly the end of a "long war." Man, after a few years of struggle, comes to nothing. Whatever his degree of magnificence, whether he adhered to the traditional principles of good or indulged in bizarre evils, he comes inevitably to dust. And the dust has no meaning.⁹

The dust does have meaning, but it is unclear exactly what that meaning is. Webster fluctuates between irony and sincerity, and does not give us a firm foothold on which to stand. This fluctuation deepens the anxiety of the relationship to the dead immeasurably: there is a haunting within the haunting of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Indeed, the motto which Webster bestows on Shakespeare, Dekker, and Heywood ("non norunt, Haec

monumenta mori” [To the Reader, 40]) applies best to his own works: These monuments do not know how to die.

2. The Centrality of Eschatology to *The Duchess of Malfi*

The dramatic precedents for Webster’s eschatology in *The Duchess of Malfi* demonstrate the general tenor of his approach to the end of the world, but his use of them does not fully show how central eschatology is to his tragedies. It would be an error to see Webster’s use of the final judgment as merely one aspect of *The Duchess of Malfi*—a kind of leftover allusion from the medieval tradition, which runs through his early modern counterparts as well. For Webster, eschatology is at the heart of tragedy.

The sheer number of eschatological texts published in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century is enough to qualify the moment as an explosion in appetite for the subject, and also renders necessary, for this essay’s purposes, an introductory approach to eschatology before a direct application to Webster. The creation of a vibrant and extensive eschatological discourse both opened new resonance for Webster’s dramatic use of eschatology, and assured that his audience would be familiar with at least the outline of the debate. The years leading up to the performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* produced an enormous and confusing collection of religious ideas under the general rubric of eschatology: Fifth Monarchism, pre-millenarianism, post-millenarianism, amillenarianism; and these are apart from the specific beliefs of the Anglicans, Baptists, Anabaptists, Catholics and other religious groups. The fragmentation of beliefs occasioned by the Reformation takes on surrealistic dimensions when eschatology is in question. By the 1640s, eschatology consisted of little more than a mass of splinters. Nonetheless, in 1612, Ben Jonson felt confident enough to refer to “the two legs and the fourth Beast” in *The Alchemist* (IV.v.31–5), with the expectation that the audience would catch the reference to the book of Daniel. In 1616, King James, who had already published his own exposition of the first chapter of the book of Revelation, spoke to the Star Chamber with the assumption of “the latter dayes drawing on.”¹⁰ In 1587, William Perkins felt strongly enough about the wide-reaching belief in the imminent arrival of the end of the world that he wrote a pamphlet partly *against* it. In *A Fruitfull Dialogue Concerning the end of the World*, Perkins battles against a host of common beliefs, and was moved strongly to reject a common bit of street doggerel:

When after Christs birth there be expired,
Of hundred fiftene, yeares eighty eight

Then comes the time of dangers to be feared,
 And all mankind with dolours it shall freight,
 For if the world in that yeare does not fall,
 If sea and land then perish ne decay.
 Yet empires all, and Kingdomes alter shall,
 And man to ease himselfe shall have no way.¹¹ (Workes, III, 467)

This juicy prediction was popular enough to receive attention in the 1577 work of Thomas Rogers, *Of the ende of this worlde and second coming of Christ*.

While there was general consensus that the imminent end of the world was a reality, agreement ended on any specific matters. For example, Protestant eschatology divided believers on the basis of the position of the millennium of Christ's rule around the end of time. Had the thousand years already begun, or had it passed? Was there a period of Christ's rule on earth before the judgment, or was there judgment followed by Christ's rule? Or was there no period of Christ's rule on earth at all? Did history come to an abrupt end? Bryan Ball gives us the three basic answers to these questions.

The amillennialist held that the thousand year period belonged to the past and had no further place in the scheme of future events. The premillennialist stressed a future millennium which was to be inaugurated by the second coming of Christ. The postmillennialist also anticipated a coming millennium but emphasized generally that a literal advent would not take place until its end. Although the variations upon minor interpretative detail within each classification were almost infinite, the deviations from the three main streams were surprisingly few.¹²

Not only were all three of the varieties of mainstream eschatological thought widely disseminated, but the variations within the mainstream were numerous and popular. Napier's *A plaine discovery of the whole Reuelation of Saint Iohn* was published in four editions before 1612. Brightman's *A Revelation of the Apocalypse* went through three editions before 1616, despite the fact that it consists of 820 pages of dense exegesis.

For our purposes it is unnecessary to dive into the intricacies of each of these eschatological positions, since as Ball notes above, they are "almost infinite." It is, however, crucial to note that this "infinity" existed. The eschatology of the period is a wildly diverse assortment of competitive discourses about the end of the world: they share only a certain vagueness and an odd grasp on particulars. Though later than Webster at the time of writing, Robert Bolton's *Last and Learned Worke of the Four Last Thinges* contains this duality with startlingly unselfconscious confidence. Compare the two selections:

For, every glorified body shall for ever be utterly impossible, and un-impressionable with any quality, action, or alteration... I say, there so or so, I doe not heare enquire or contend, but leave all alterations in this kinde to the curious disquisitions of such idle and ill-exercis'd divines.¹³

The bodies of the saints in heaven shall be passingly beautiful, shining and amiable.

Two things (according to Austen) concur to the constitution of beauty.

1. A due and comely proportion; an apt and congruent symmetry and mutual correspondency of all parts of the body: or in a word wellfavourednesse
2. Amiableness of colour; a pleasing mixture of those two lively colours, of white and red. I add a third:
3. A cheerfull, lively, lightsome aspect. When the two former materials (as it were) are pleasantly enliv'd, and actuated by a lively quicknesse and modest merrinesse of countenance.¹⁴

In the first selection, Bolton refuses to give specifics about the transformed body of the Resurrected Saints, and scolds other prognosticators for doing so; in the second, he is willing to go so far as to say that the saints are shining, red and white, and merry.

The eschatology of the Renaissance plays two games. On the one hand, there is an embarrassment of riches within specific, and contradictory, information about the signs of the second advent. There is a plethora of explanations for every line of the book of Revelation, and an “almost infinite” number of general theories of its meaning. On the other hand, warnings against certainty on the subject of the end of the world were commonplace. Acknowledging the mystery of the second advent was more than a rhetorical gesture, and despite the flash and sizzle of particular exegesis, constituted the larger part of Renaissance eschatology. The humility towards the mystery of the end of days was the fundamental point of Perkins's *Fruitfull Dialogue* (cited earlier). For instance, he writes:

Indeed I think it is not lawfull to be curious to search out the time, in which the end shall be: it is a thinge in which Christians are not to meddle. For it is the will of God, that this should not be knowne. Therefore whoever searches this time, doth against the will of God: to this purpose it is said in the Acts, *it is not for you to know the times and seasons*. Moreover, God hath kept the knowledge of this secret unto himselfe: And neither the Angels, nor Christ as he is man, knows this time, wherefore it shall be pride and vanity in man, to occupy himself in searching it out.¹⁵

Regardless of the fact that so many prophecies, and interpretations of prophecies, were being developed and circulated, the mainstream of English Chris-

tianity awaited the mystery of the end of days while accepting the necessary obscurities of its details. The explosion of eschatological texts only served to deepen the confusion: they made it absolutely clear that something terrifying and glorious was right around the corner, and fed the fascination about the end of the world. At the same time, by their sheer numbers, the books showed that the exact nature of the mystery was hidden.

This sense of mystery was entirely within keeping with mainstream Christianity from Augustine on. Certainly it is absolutely consistent with I Corinthians 13, verses nine through twelve:

For we know in part, and wee prophecie in part.
But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part, shall be abolished.
When I was a child, I spake as a child, and understood as a child, I thought as childe: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.
For now we see through a glass darkly: but then shall we see face to face. Now I know in part: but then shall I know even as I am known.¹⁶

Revelation itself is a mysterious dream, whose purpose is both to prophesy the glorious transformations of the end of the world and to obscure its own meaning: it is self-consciously a mystery. In Donne's religious writing, this mystery finds expression in paradoxical images that stretch the limits of imagination. In the *Devotions* he writes:

All mankinde is of one author, and is one volume; when one Man dies, one Chapter is not torne out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every Chapter must be so translated; God emploies several translators; some peeces are translated by Age, some by sicknesse, some by warre, some by justice; but Gods hand is in every translation; and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves againe, for that librarie where every booke shall like open to one another.¹⁷

And in the sermons:

I shall know, not only as I know already that a Bee-hive, that an Ant-hill is the same Book in Decimo sexto, as a Kingdom is in Folio, That a Flower that lives but a day, is an abridgment of that King, that lives out his threescore and ten years; but I shall know too, that all these Ants, and Bees, and Flowers, and Kings, and Kingdoms, howsoever they may be Examples, and Comparisons to one another, yet they are all as nothing, altogether nothing, less than nothing, infinitely less than nothing, to that which shall then be the subject of my knowledge, for, it is the knowledge of the glory of God.¹⁸

Donne has a peculiar gift for images of the ineffable, and here they happily coincide with the Protestant eschatology in its most mainstream form: there is the revelation of a marvelous transformation at hand, but the nature of that

transformation is hidden by our fallen natures, by the fact that we are in history. The mystery is what we are left with.

It is important to recognize the unrivalled relevance of this obscurity, in a vision of history that is so fastidiously teleological. The end of history and the judgment of God are the final gestures that redeem all time. If those gestures become confused, the entire point of history is ultimately hidden from us. At the same time, that very obscurity becomes the absence around which all presence moves; it is the lacuna that generates the certainty of truth. In short, the obscured doomsday obeys, for English eschatology, all of the structures of an aporia. We can be sure only that there is a meaning, but we cannot be sure of the nature of that meaning. The truth is out there, but it is not here. We see through a glass darkly.

When *The Duchess of Malfi* is performed, the entire theatre becomes such a glass, and we see only darkly through it. Bosola says as much before he murders the Duchess: “this world is like her little turfe of grasse, and the Heaven ore our heades, like her looking glasse, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compasse of our prison” (IV.ii.121–2). The audience member expecting an ordinary tragedy, even by the grisly standards of Revenge tragedy after Shakespeare, could be forgiven for agreeing with Vittoria, in *The White Devil*: “O mee! This place is hell” (V.iii.175). What is so difficult for critics to accept is the gratuity of the plots, and the sudden, seemingly meaningless, drifts of the characters. This violent degradation must have some purpose, and that purpose must have a name: writhing grubs, decadence, irony, the glory of recognizing our vacuity, the human spirit triumphing over the dark and overwhelming universe that surrounds us. Ultimately, however, none of these solutions satisfies, because they are historical; they look for an answer that can be understood in time. Such an answer does not exist in the play. The only thing that can redeem these characters is the judgment of God. The fact that the judgment is obscured is the point: nothing imaginable can redeem the characters of the two tragedies; something unimaginable will redeem them, but only at the very end. This obscured relationship to the apocalypse and judgment is the draft of wind that feeds the fires of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It is everywhere present, but never visible.

There is a very simple retelling of the Duchess of Malfi story with all its religious implications in Thomas Beard’s *The Theatre of God’s Iudgments* (1597). The contrast with Webster is illuminating. The plot is much the same, up until the ending:

But in the midway shee [the Duchess] was overtaken and brought back to Naples, where in short space shee miserably ended her life: For her brothers guard strangled her to death, together with her chambermaid, who had served instead of a bawd to them; and

her poor infants which shee had by the said Bologne. But he by the goodnesse of his horse escaping, took his flight to Millaine where he sojourned quietly a long while, until at the instant pursuit of one of her brothers, the Cardinall of Arragon, he was slain in the open streets, when he least mistrusted any present danger. And this was a true Cardinal-like exploit indeed, representing that mildness, mercifulnesse and good nature which is so required of every Christian in traitorous murdering a man so many years after the first rancour was conceived, that might well in half that space have been digested, in fostering hatred so long in his cruell heart, and waging ruffians and murderers to commit so monstrous an act: wherein albeit the Cardinals cruelty was so famous, as also in putting to death the poor infants, yet Gods justice bare the sway, that used him as an instrument to punish those, who under the vail of secret marriage, thought it lawfull for them to commit any villainy. And thus God busieth sometime the most wicked about his will, and maketh the rage and fury of the devil himselfe serve for means to bring to passe his fearfull judgments.¹⁹

Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* works on exactly the inverse narrative principle of this anecdote. Beard tries to find comfort in the horrid story of the secret marriage, by finding in it evidence of God's hand, and he makes it his business to justify God's dealings. But he fails: nowhere does he explain why God permitted the infants to die. Webster's play contains neither the arrogance of Beard, nor the stupid brutishness of his morality. What Beard forces on us as the moral of the story, Webster leaves entirely unspoken, and at a remove from the action of the drama. Webster does not speak for God. Nor is he a poet of God's silences. In Webster, God is *about* to speak. The final two lines of *The Duchess of Malfi* as much as say so:

*Integrity of life, is fames best friend,
Which nobely (beyond Death) shall crowne the end. (V.v.120)*

Integrity can be found, not after death, but beyond it. Only there will we find integrity, and not, as in Beard's moralistic and ultimately impious imagination, in weak justifications of God's purposes in mortal action.

The White Devil and *The Duchess of Malfi* are consumed with apocalyptic sensibility, charged with the terrible mysteries of ultimate truth and temporal incompleteness. The brilliant fragments glisten darkly for that reason, and their force is due to the hunger for redemption so manifest throughout the plays. Spenser ends *The Fairie Queene* with the prayer, "With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight: / O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoths sight."²⁰ The desire that motivates the "vnperfite" conclusion to the religious epic is the wellspring and source of tragedy in Webster.

itself to this sole question, but ultimately concluded with the same point of ineffability we have seen throughout.

The dignitie of the image of God after his creation, was no doubt notable, & excellent, & did brightly shew forth the love of the creator for his creature: but that image of God which shalbe restored after the resurrection, to all those that beleve in Christ, shal be much more excellent. For we shall be colored and clensed with the precious blood of Christ. And this restitution will be perpetuall & unchangeable, wheras in the first state of man it was changeable & indured for a short time. And as heavenly life with Christ doth far excel the earthly life with Adam before his fall: even so no doubt the image of God perfectly restored by Christ in glorification, shall much excel the first donation: but because the curious sifting of these matters passe the compasse of mans capacitie, and small is the smacke that we have of these things, whiles our soules are clogged with earthly vessels, let us besech Christ to hasten his coming.²¹

Logically, it is impossible to imagine our bodies restored beyond the image of God, but the logical impossibility makes certain to us the gross fallenness and instability of our own flesh. Our bodies and our souls are incomplete fragments of a totality which we cannot imagine. The same sense of the dis-integrity of mortal bodies infects the whole of the Duchess' death scene.

DUTCHESSE. Who am I?

BOSOLA. Thou art a box of worme-seede, at best, but a slavatory of greene mummery: what's this flesh? A little cruded milk, phantastical puffe-paste: our bodies are weaker then those paper prisons boyes use to keepe flies in: more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth-wormes. Didst thou ever see a Larke in a cage? Such is the soule in the body: this world is like her little turfe of grasse, and the Heaven ore our heades, like her looking glasse, onely gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compasse of our prison.

DUTCHESSE. Am not I, thy Dutchesse?

BOSOLA. Thou art some great woman sure, for riot begins to sit on thy fore-head (clad in gray haire) twenty yeares sooner, then on a merry milke maydes. Thou sleep'st worse, then if a mouse should be forc'd to take up her lodging in a cats eare: a little infant, that breedes it's teeth, should it lie with thee, would crie out, as if thou wert the more unquiet bed-fellow.

DUTCHESSE. I am Dutchesse of Malfy still. (IV.ii.115–31)

Indeed, she is still the Duchess of Malfi at the end of the play, but what will she be in the very end? In the mean time, the conception of glorious physical transformation allows Webster's imagination to reconfigure the body in newly inglorious ways.²²

In all of these visions of the end of the world, there is consistently the idea of restitution. The fallen world, the world that we live in, will be fulfilled at the end of time: our knowledge will be made perfect, our bodies will be more than they once were, and the material world will be at one with God's

will. What is fragmentary and incomplete now will be made unimaginably whole in the future. But, at the same time, the future is always obscured from our view. How much more difficult is this position when the future is the only time that can explain the present brokenness. Renaissance eschatology is a darkness that subsumes all of history in the obscurity of the promise of completeness. Many early modern playwrights use eschatology occasionally in their work or have moments when this darkness shows itself, but in Webster everything is coloured by it. Webster never lets you forget the fragmentary and incomplete riddle of the mortal world. When the God in the York mystery cycle sums up all history before the judgment, he separates his synopsis from the action. In Webster, every second is shot through with the incompleteness of its mortal, sublunary position. Every moment is the “straight gate” of disintegration that calls out for judgment.

4. *The Duchess of Malfi* Beyond Death

Renaissance eschatology is the epiphenomenal motivation of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The removed and obscured promise of a glorious transformation at the end of time is the ubiquitous mystery here. Those critics who have reduced him to a mere spectacle-maker for the morbidly inclined, can be rejected out of hand; but there are more serious contenders who find in Webster only “writhing grubs.” Even Lucas, defending Webster against such accusations, can find only the tepid justifications of “bravery” or “irony”:

Among the dead piled high in this Valley of Gehinnom, amid the silent fretting of the eternal worm, glows only that red unquenchable fire of human bravery. There remains no other light for those to follow who have seen the falsity of all deluding gleams: and to what goal shall it lead them? To rest, perhaps, at last—“to be laid by and never thought on.” They do not indeed live, these characters of Webster’s, with this frightful vision perpetually before their eyes: who could? They lose themselves in the loves and lusts, the hopes and hates that suffice to fill the passing day; but always their eyes are opened towards the coming of their end. They see then that they have agonized only after vanities; and that the sleep of death which awaits them now is better. There is talk, no doubt, of Hell and Heaven beyond this life, of the eternal Church and of devils in their livery of flame. Who knows? The prayers and curses that go up to Heaven have, it seems, a great way to go.²³

It is not beyond life but “beyond death” that the characters of these dramas will find rest. Not having the eschatology of the period in mind while reading these plays does lead to interpretations that despair of making sense of the work. It becomes meaningless in the eyes of such interpreters. The plot is sloppy. The imagination behind it is diseased. P. Brown writes,

The most obvious feature of man's life in this *saeculum* is that it is doomed to remain incomplete. No human potentiality can ever reach its fulfillment in it; no human tension can ever be resolved. The fulfillment of human personality lies beyond it; it is infinitely postponed to the end of time, to the Last Day and the glorious resurrection.²⁴

It sounds like a garden variety criticism of Webster's dramatic structure, but Brown is in fact describing Augustine's *City of God*, and not *The Duchess of Malfi*. The point is that the "gratuity" of Webster is in fact part and parcel of his place in mainstream Christian eschatology. With the vision of judgment in mind, Webster's plays are not messes, but mysteries, sublimely disintegrated and watchful; these are plays waiting for God.

Cynthia Marshall, in her study of Shakespeare's eschatology, writes of the stage that "within this magic circle, human behavior can be controlled, or human understanding can be illuminated. The dead can be revived and enjoy reunion. Closure can be, and must be, attained. Theatre has its own eschatology."²⁵ But where Shakespeare's romances find their desires embedded in a reenactment or reconfiguration of the glorious end itself, Webster's tragedies abide permanently in the realm just before it. As Stephen Daedalus put it 300 years later, "history is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake." But we never awake, and neither do the characters of *The Duchess of Malfi*.

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Notes

1. Rupert Brooke, *John Webster & the Elizabethan Drama* (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart, 1916), p. 158.
2. From Lucas's general introduction to John Webster, *The Complete Works of John Webster*, Vol. 1–Vol. 4, ed. F.L. Lucas (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p. 34.
3. For an excellent summary of the criticism after Lucas, and evidence of its focus on Webster's morbidity, see the introduction of Anders Dallby, *The Anatomy of Evil: a Study of John Webster's The White Devil* (Lund: CWK, 1974).
4. From the general introduction to John Webster, *The Selected Plays of John Webster*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. xii.
5. Obviously, no mystery cycle would be complete without a representation of the end of the world: the judgment is necessary to its cyclical nature, and constitutes, alongside creation, a quintessential element of the drama. See Arnold Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1961), pp. 88–9, where he writes:

All four cycles end with a doomsday play. York and Towneley are partly identical. The essential action consists of the summons to resurrection by the angels, the separation of the saved from the damned, and the sentencing of the one group to heaven, the other to hell. Before He orders the angels to blow the trump which will summon all to judgment, the York God reviews the whole of human history, emphasizing the

redemption. Chester begins with God ordering the summons, Ludus with the summons itself, and Towneley (which may have lost its beginning) with speeches by the damned souls after the summons.

See also Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), for evidence of eschatological impulses throughout the cycles. On page 311, he writes, "The emphasis in this formal ending is such that eschatological time—the time of the future—becomes an important dramatic dimension."

6. See David Bergeron's "Webster's Allusion to *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*," *English Language Notes* 17 (1980), p. 253.
7. All references to *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are from John Webster, *The Works of John Webster*, Vol. 1, ed. David Gunby, David Carnegie, and Antony Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
8. See Michael Neill, "Monuments and Ruins as Symbols in *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *Drama and Symbolism*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 71–87. Neill notes the intriguing connections between the use of the echo here and in George Wither's "Prince Henry's Obsequies". Of course Sidney uses the same technique in the *Arcadia*, from which Webster borrowed heavily throughout his career. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the echo would have had current resonance as a mournful poetic technique.
9. Travis Bogard, *The Tragic Satire of John Webster* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), p. 41.
10. Quoted in Bryan Ball, *A Great Exposition: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), p. 1.
11. William Perkins, *A fruitfull dialogue between the Christian and the Worlde concerning the end of the World*, in *Workes*, Vol. III (London: Printed by Iohn Legatt, 1635), pp. 459–75, 467.
12. Ball, p. 161.
13. Robert Bolton, *Mr. Bolton's last and learned worke of the foure last things* (London: Printed by George Miller, dwelling in the Black-Friers, 1632), pp. 131–2.
14. Bolton, pp. 136–7.
15. Perkins, p. 473. In this quotation, as in all others, italics are from the author and not me.
16. All references to the Bible come from *The Geneva Bible* (Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition), ed. Gerald T. Sheppard, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989). My assumption is that, even though the KJV was available to Webster during the time of writing, the Geneva would have been the edition he studied.
17. John Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. Neil Rhodes (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 125.
18. Donne, p. 183.
19. Thomas Beard, *The theatre of God's iudgments* (London: Printed by Adam Islip, 1597), pp. 222–3.
20. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).
21. John Woolton, *A newe anatomie of the whole man* (London: Thomas Purfoote, dwelling in Paules churchyard at the signe of the Lucrece, 1576), pp. 49–50.

22. Webster explored the resurrected body in a different vein in his funeral elegy for Prince Henry, which was composed somewhere within the time of *The Duchess of Malfi*'s composition. (This passage is from Lucas's edition of the *Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 269.)

He was raign'd downe to us out of heaven, & drew
Life to the spring, yet like a little dew
Quickly drawne thence; so many times miscarries
A Christall glasse whilst that the workeman varies
The shape i'th' furnace (fixt too much upon
The curiousnesse of the propor[t]ion)
Yet breakes it ere't be finsht, and yet then
Moulds it anew, and blowes it up agen,
Exceeds his workemanship and sends it thence,
To kisse the hand and lip of some great Prince.
Or like the dyall broke in wheele or screw,
That's tane in peeces to be made go true:
So to eternity he now shall stand,
New form'd and gloried by the All-working hand. (ll. 231–44)

23. Lucas, p. 40.
24. Quoted in Margaret Reeves, "The Development of Apocalyptic Thought: Medieval Attitudes," *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C.A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 40–72, 41.
25. Cynthia Marshall, *Last Things and Last Plays: Shakespearean Eschatology* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 114.