View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by UEL Research Repository at University of East London

University of East London Institutional Repository: http://roar.uel.ac.uk

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

Author(s): Rustin, Margaret., Rustin, Michael.
Article Title: Sibling Catastrophes: an Essay on two Jacobean Tragedies
Year of publication: 2007
Citation: Rustin, M. Rustin, M. (2007) 'Sibling Catastrophes: an Essay on two Jacobean Tragedies' Costruzioni Psicoanalitiche 13: 31-52
Link to published version:
http://www.francoangeli.it/Riviste/sommario.asp?anno=2007&idRivista=97
DOI: (not stated)
Publisher statement: (not stated)

Information on how to cite items within roar@uel:
http://www.uel.ac.uk/roar/openaccess.htm#Citing

Text of paper published in Italian as 'Disordini psichici e sociali. "Il Diavolo Bianco e La Duchessa di Amalfi" di Webster.' *Construzione Psichoanalytiche: Rivista dell Instituto di Psicoterapia Psicoanalytico* (Issue on La violenza e la sua globalizzizione.) A. Viii – n. 13/2007, pp 31-52.

Sibling Catastrophes: an Essay on two Jacobean Tragedies

Margaret and Michael Rustin[1]

In this essay, we explore the mental and social worlds depicted in Webster's two great Jacobean tragedies, The White Devil (1612) and The Duchess of Malfi. (1623). We are in particular interested in the sibling relationships depicted in these plays, and will explore the question of how far the strength or weakness of these relationships, their domination by the life or death drives, by emotions of love or hate, can be understood as a measure of the health of the social order in which these relationships are situated.

We first need to say two things by way of preface. First, about our approach to the psychoanalytical and historical understanding of drama. We see theatre as a symbolic space, of its very nature, in which audiences go to enjoy representations of lives like their own. Most often, in the classical theatre of the west, from ancient Greek tragedy to the present, what is represented on the stage are dramas about families and the crises that happen in them. There are remarkable parallels between psychoanalytic representations of the inner lives of families and their members, and what dramatists portray in the action of their plays. (Simon 1988, Alford 1993, Rustin and Rustin 2002). Thus Freud was able to take King Oedipus as a 'master-narrative', which enabled him to set out the basic outlines of the Oedipus Complex. In King Oedipus, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. From Oedipus's point of view, his parents preferred to expose him to near-certain death rather

[1] This paper was first given as a Tavistock Clinic Open Lecture, in a series called Reflections on Siblings: Drama and Psychoanalysis', in May 2004.

than see their couple disrupted by the presence of a disruptive third party, with the murderous and divisive intent that the oracle said he would have. Hamlet also suffers from Oedipal anguish, as his uncle, usurping his father's place, marries his mother. King Lear found it intolerable to allow his fatherly and kingly authority pass on to the next generation, his three daughters. Prospero, in The Tempest, suffers a reverse-Oedipal struggle - of the parents faced with the new life represented by their children. It is in fact difficult to find more than a handful of major plays from the classical tradition of Western theatre which don't revolve around basic familial themes - the dilemmas of gender and generation, what Roger Money-Kyrle described as 'the facts of life.' (Money-Kyrle 1968). It is because it is within families that societies reproduce themselves, that dramatists are able to represent fundamental crises in entire societies through the relationships of exemplary individuals in their roles as parents and children, sexual partners and siblings.[2] If 'families can't function, then nothing can,' seems to be the fundamental idea.

Secondly, our interest in sibling relationships. Siblings have been a neglected topic in psychoanalytic theory until quite recently. As new psychoanalytic writing about siblings emerged (Houzel 2001, Mitchell 2000, 2003, Coles 2003, 2006) we were interested to look once again at classical theatre to see how far great dramatists had anticipated the insights of psychoanalysis into the nature of sibling relationships, their causes and consequences. We wrote about Sophocles' Antigone and Electra, Shakespeare's Measure for Measure and Twelfth Night, (Rustin and Rustin 2006) and Webster's The White Devil and the Duchess of Malfi, among other plays, to explore what these dramatists had understood about siblings. We were not surprised to find that they had anticipated much of what psychoanalysis has subsequently discovered, by their quite different method of imaginative exploration and expression.

We started with Shakespearean comedies. We were asked how the enjoyment of them by audiences who went to see them in the 1590s might be compared with the enjoyment by modern audiences of television shows like Friends. We had suggested that the Shakespearean comedies had created an imaginary space in which all kinds of relationships between young men and women, in the role of partners, siblings, and friends, and with and against figures in parental authority over them, could be explored. Everyday restraints on the freedom of young people, which were considerable in Elizabethan times, could be lifted in imagination through sending characters off into the woods away from the parental gaze (as in A Midsummer Night's Dream) or having them shipwrecked and separated from each other (as in Twelfth Night), and in some of the comedies cross-dressing, mistaken identities, love-potions, and the interventions of mischievous sprites like Puck and Ariel added further to the conditions of imagined freedom. In this mode of fantasy, emotional complexities, including those of sexual identity, could be experimented with in the mind. Thus one might think of the comedies – and of course Shakespeare's other dramatic forms – as offering opportunities for emotional exploration for members of his audiences, imaginary versions of how one might live in exciting new times. The parallel with many TV soaps and popular films is that they too offer versions of possible relationships within and between generations, and explore the dilemmas and conflicts which they unavoidably bring. In other words, it may be instructive to think of Shakespeare's work as having some of the same functions and meanings for his audiences as various forms of popular culture do in ours.

What then of Jacobean drama, and its darker imagined world of violence, conspiracy, sexual perversity, torture, tyranny, and murder? What is the connection, if any, between the world represented in the *grand guignol* of much of the Jacobean theatre, and the actual social world of Jacobean London? It is well worth thinking about these connections, but one must not be too literal about them. Just as Shakespeare's comedies are not fictional

---

[2] We have developed this view at length, with reference to many plays, in Mirror to Nature: Drama, Psychoanalysis and Society. London: Karnac (2001), and published in Italian as Passioni in Scena, Rome: Mondadori 2005.

reports of summer picnics or camping trips by young people in the Forest of Arden, or stories of holiday visits to exotic places (there was not much of an overseas travel industry in Elizabethan England nor did many young people take 'gap years' to find themselves alone in Illyria), so one should not be too literal in seeking the real-life equivalents of Jacobean dramas which so often end with almost the entire cast lying assassinated on the stage. One can only hope to understand the meaning of these plays with the help of the idea of dramatic convention, a form of symbolic mediation between social reality and its dramatic representation.

Illuminating in this regard, though they were written long ago, are two short essays by the American film critic, Robert Warshow, 'The Gangster as Tragic Hero', (1948) and 'Movie Chronicle: 'The Westerner' (1954) reprinted in Warshow (2002). Warshow described the extreme stylisation of each of those two well-known genres of cinema. Both represent important and contrasting aspects of the American society that produced them, though neither of them do this in a descriptively realist way.

It is irrelevant to point out, Warshow says, that 'most Americans have never seen a gangster. What matters is that the experience of the gangster *as an experience of art* is universal to Americans.' Although Warshow does not quite put it in this way, it is clear that he thinks both these genres are indirect representations of a fiercely competitive and violent social order. The gangster film provides an experience of the tragic in a society whose unrelenting ideological optimism denies its possibility. Its heroes are 'little men' who make it through their exercise of personal charisma and ruthless violence, and through their single-minded desire for power and reputation. They have all the money and glamorous women they want, but their tenure on this is precarious, since there are always younger and rival pretenders to their positions. They are doomed inevitably to fall as their powers wane or as younger contenders challenge them. Oedipal struggles are among those which are worked out in these fictional gang-wars. Gangsters exist – indeed they seem to be trapped – in the tough milieu of the city. It's often said that

the relationship between the real world of American gangsters, and its fictional representations, was rather mixed up, and that life was imitating art as well as art imitating life. Real gangsters learned to play their parts, it is alleged, by going to the movies. In Warshow's words, 'The real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster; he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become.'

The Westerner, by contrast, exists in a kind of pastoral, the nostalgic world of the Old West and the Frontier. For him, violence is mediated by a code of honour, and by a sense of style. Whereas the gangster is distinctive for his willingness to break all rules – to massacre his rivals while they are his guests at dinner for example – the honour of the western hero depends on his never drawing his gun first, or shooting his enemy in the back. Whilst the convention of the gangster movie is that the irrepressible will to power which pervades this society must lead to failure and death in the end, the western represents an ideal or fantasy of an ever-present violence which is safely contained within a moral order. Warshow's brilliant insight was that these two genres represented alternative versions of essentially the same individualistic and competitive world.

Warshow noted that highly stylised conventions of art had also been developed historically, and he referred to Elizabethan revenge tragedy and Restoration comedy as two such examples. We think it is instructive to think of Jacobean drama in these terms, not as a 'realist' depiction of Jacobean England, but as an extreme and formalised representation of some aspects of it. Such representations give an imaginary form to experience, provide ways of thinking and feeling about the world, whatever their descriptive truth may be. This is a genre of drama which explores in fantasy a situation of moral and social breakdown, and of vicious exploitation and rapacity among the powerful. It would not have been possible to stage plays about political oppression or corruption in Elizabethan or Jacobean England which purported to describe local realities. These were in effect 'police states',

whose governments employed many spies and informers, which practised censorship of the theatre, and were ever ready to punish what they deemed to be acts of sedition with torture and execution. So to explore the states of mind engendered by life in this society required a rather extravagant exercise of the imagination. Thus a world of make-believe was constructed, whose actions were located in safely remote places (Italy or Spain), whose rulers could be represented in extreme terms without risk, with a church which was Catholic and whose cardinals could thus be portrayed as cynical and immoral, and whose courts could be filled with Machiavellian plotters and thugs. This was all the 'safer' because the mise-en-scene of many of these plays were cities and states which belonged to the camp of England's enemies, at a time when the Catholic powers were feared, and when Catholics in England were being persecuted. It is most unlikely that one can correctly read Jacobean tragedies as *theatre a clef,* in terms of which lord at the court this or that character alludes to. Links with social reality are to be looked for in more refracted ways. These plays imagined another, exotic, exciting and terrifying world which then became part of the everyday imaginary, as Godfathers do of our own. Just as we may go to the cinema today specifically to escape from the everyday (whilst at the same time finding a way of exploring and experiencing it in fantasy when we do) so Jacobean citizens may have found pleasurable relief from their worrying times by going to the theatre, just because their feelings could be expressed there in a 'safe' form. But it nevertheless seems likely that the drama did both reflect and shape the antagonisms which were enacted two or three decades later in the English Civil War. And soon after coming into power, the revolutionary government closed down the theatres.

In Measure for Measure Shakespeare portrayed a world in which authority was in a state of extreme debility. The ruling Duke Vincentio, knowing that licence and disorder have overtaken his city, temporarily abdicates from his position as ruler, installing as his deputy a moral zealot, and as it turns out, venal hypocrite, Angelo. He launches a moral crusade

against sexuality which is revealed to be even more cruel and predatory than the lax world it seeks to reform. Brother and sister, Claudio and Isabella, fall out, when Angelo demands that Isabella give up her virginity in exchange for her brother's life. But although the Duke intervenes to prevent the worst happening, and everyone is recalled to their legal and familial duty, it is impossible to feel that anything more than a patching up of a disintegrated, individualised, and uncontained social order has taken place. This play seems to warn about the catastrophe which could come about if social bonds become weak, whilst its action pulls back from the brink.

In Webster's two great tragedies, and in the other major tragedies of the Jacobean period, the worst does happen, and all social and moral connections between people are dissolved. As Franco Moretti[3] has pointed out, in these plays effective power has shifted from kings and dukes holding legitimate authority, to disgruntled chancers existing at the margins of the court - Bosola in The Duchess of Malfi, Flamineo in The White Devil, De Flores in The Changeling. (Vincentio in Measure for Measure was a transitional figure in this evolution, since in order to restore authority he first had to abdicate his dukedom and disguise himself as a powerless friar.) Ties of affection and obligation within families, the foundation of legitimate order in this society since they determine the inheritance of status, wealth, and power, are shown to have entirely broken down. The Duchess of Malfi ends with the Duchess being tortured and then murdered by order of her twin brother, Ferdinand. Flamineo, in The White Devil, is only prevented from killing his sister, Vittoria Corombona, (who has just failed to kill him first) by the arrival of the assassins Lodovico and Gasparo, who kill both of them. Relations between families, often uneasy and unstable in Shakespearean drama, have here become ruthless fights to the death between rival clans. Duke Brachiano in The White Devil is not unlike a modern gangster hero, with Vittoria Corombona his glamorous prize, and Cardinal Monticelso and Duke Francisco defend the honour of their kinsfolk, Camillo and Isabella, (both murdered by Brachiano) as leaders of a rival alliance of gangs whose power

is threatened by the newcomers. The implication is that Brachiano and Corombona represent a new form and style of power, in Brachiano's flaunting of his wealth, and Corombona's eloquent defiance in court of the sententious and mystifying hypocrisies of the old order, and her unapologetic commitment to her own self-interest, or as we would now say her career. (What better representation has there ever been in the theatre of the deployment of sex-appeal as a means for social advancement?).

In these plays, killing and torture are elaborated in an excess of sadism. The object is not merely the removal of an enemy, but the torment and terror of the victim, and the pleasure of the killer. Those hired as torturers or assassins – Bosola and Lodovico for example – have past histories of being humiliated and tortured themselves. The dramatist shows us how suffering and hatred are transmitted between perpetrators and victims, with victims becoming perpetrator in their own turn. These plays remind us that torture and execution were the common practice of the state of the day. But where Shakespeare, with his concern with the idea of a legitimate political order, tended to locate his executions off the stage, adjacent to the action, the Jacobeans put death and cruelty at the centre, in their elaboration of sadistic pleasure.

The White Devil

But our primary focus in this article is on relationships between siblings. What of these, in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi?

'The White Devil' opens with two crucial scenes. In the first we meet Count Ludovico who has just been pronounced banished, for a variety of crimes. He complains bitterly that others get away with it, and vows revenge. He is revealed as a killer, so his promise is ominous:

LODOVICO Leave your painted comforts;

---

[3] Franco Moretti (1983), Signs Taken for Wonders (chapter 2 'The Great Eclipse') London:

I'll make Italian cut-works in their guts
If ever I'll return. (II, 1, 54-5)

The source of his chilling murderous fantasy is his intense desire to be part of Rome's high life, to be an insider. His envy of the Duke of Brachiano's illicit link to Vittoria Corombona points to the action to follow. In the second scene, Flamineo, Vittoria's brother, is introduced, and here is the second deadly ingredient of the 'revenge tragedy' we are to witness. Flamineo is Brachiano's servant and is acting as the go-between or pander to bring the lovers together and outwit their spouses. He spins words expertly to stir up his master's desires:

FLAMINEO Observe you not tonight my honoured lord
Which way so-er you went she threw her eyes?
……
We may now talk freely: 'bove merit! What is't you doubt?
Her coyness; that's but the superfices of lust most women have; Yet why should women blush to hear that named, which they do not fear to handle?
(I, 2, 11-12, 17-20)

Later in the scene, his trickery is used to full effect to mislead the credulous Camillo, his brother-in-law, into believing him a friend rather than a sly betrayer. There is a telling image in his exchange with Duke Brachiano which describes the essence of the intolerable feeling of exclusion from the court (the birdcage) and notes its corollary, the fate of being trapped within.

FLAMINEO 'Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden: the birds that are without despair to get in, and the birds that are within despair and are in a consumption for fear they shall never get out. (I, 2, 44-7)

The worst of human motives are stirred by this position of excluded but titillated onlooker: greed, envy and violence come to dominate in the

---

Verso.

desperate effort to climb back in. Not only of course does Flamineo feel excluded from the court but also from the sexual relationship of the Duke with Vittoria.

Another theme of importance is the thin line between what is desired and imagined and the action taken to bring it about. Vittoria's dream (I, 2, 236 onwards) divulged to the Duke, might be read either as a revelation of her unconscious desires – a wish-fulfilling dream in which her husband and Brachiano's wife both end up dead as punishment for their intention to 'bury her alive' (that is, prevent her union with the Duke) or as a direct conscious incitement to him to dispose of both of them and thus remove the persecuting impediments to their union. Perhaps we should assume that Webster had both versions in mind, leaving space for one or other to be emphasised in the production, and that he is unsettling his audience by making clear just how close the wish can be to the act. Thus Flamineo notes 'The devil was in your dream' as the explanation for Vittoria's apparently troubled statement 'And yet for all this terror I could not pray.' (I, 2, 253-5)

FLAMINEO Excellent devil!
She hath taught him in a dream to make away his duchess and
her husband. (I, 2, 260-2)

The duke responds by promising to protect her from the jealousy of her husband and the envy of the duchess, thus restating the central part that the passions of exclusion play in the whole plot, and the endless necessity of projecting them outside the self to secure protection from such painful states of mind. Generally, Webster places Vittoria adjacent to the violent action, imagining its benefits for her, and provoking it in others, rather than directly instigating it. The men – Brachiano, Flamineo, Francisco – finding themselves driven to such extremes to gain possession of women, or consumed by jealousy of whose who do, attribute to the women themselves the unbridled desires which have been aroused in them

By the end of Act I, all is in place. The central role of Flamineo in masterminding the action is re-stated:

FLAMINEO We are engaged to mischief and must on; (I, 2, 354-361).

The compelling fascination of his double role, as partner in crime to both the duke and his sister, is that he vicariously enters into the heart of their relationship. [4] Without him, it would not be consummated. Instead of the pains of the excluded third, with their oedipal roots, he is rewarded with a sense of parasitic involvement with each side. The incestuous feelings towards his spectacularly attractive sister are satisfied via his identification with the duke, and his homosexual submission to the duke via his identification with his sister. The denunciation of women's lustfulness and promiscuity which is characteristic of the Jacobean playwrights appears in the speeches of a number of the characters, and serves repeatedly to cloak the speaker in hypocritical righteousness. The splendour of the court scene, when Vittoria is arraigned and prosecuted for immorality and suspected adultery by Cardinal Monticelso, dramatises this dynamic – sexual passion is necessarily degraded, and it is women who are the problem, claims the cardinal. He meets his match in her fearless counterblast.

VITTORIA These are but feigned shadows of my evils.
Terrify babes, my lord, with painted devils,
I am past such needless palsy; for your names
Of whore and murd'ress, they proceed from you,
As if a man should spit against the wind,
The filth returns in's face.

(III, 2, 145-50) [5]

---

[4] It was a clever idea of Tom Stoppard, in writing the screenplay for Shakespeare in Love, (or perhaps it was the film's director), to show John Webster as a boy continually eavesdropping on the sexual goings on of his elders.

[5] Vittoria is at her most spirited when she has to rely on herself, as in the trial scene, when she is wrongly accused of unfaithfulness in the House of Convertites by Brachiano, and when later threatened by Flamineo.

Each of the siblings, Flamineo, Vittoria and Marcello, in their over-intense preoccupation with each other, give evidence of the damaging impact of their mother Cornelia's widowed and vulnerable state. There was no father to organise an appropriate marriage for an outstandingly beautiful and spirited daughter, and she has instead been married to a foolish and ineffective courtier, albeit nephew to a cardinal of Rome. Flamineo angrily recounts how their father spent all the family money before he died, leaving his sons to make their way without an income. Marcello has put up with this, thus remaining mother's confidant, but Flamineo is driven by his desire for more, to regain the position he feels his father should have provided for him, by criminal means if others are hard to come by. In lieu of paternal protection for their sister's position and for their own entry into the world, they have adopted two very different responses. In the trial scene, they converse thus – they have been arrested on suspicion of involvement in Camillo's death in a supposed vaulting accident. In reality Flamineo did murder Camillo, but Marcello is wholly innocent:

MARCELLO O my unfortunate sister!
I would my dagger's point had cleft her heart
When she first saw Brachiano. You 'tis said
Were made his engine and his stalking-horse
To undo my sister.

FLAMINEO I made a kind of path
To her and mine own preferment.
MARCELLO Your ruin.
FLAMINEO
Hum! Thou art a soldier,
Followest the great Duke, feedest his victories
As witches do their serviceable spirits,
Even with thy prodigal blood: what hast got?
But like the wealth of captains, a poor handful,
Which in thy palm thou bear'st, as men hold water;

Seeking to gripe it fast, the frail reward
Steals through thy fingers.

MARCELLO Sir –

FLAMINEO Thou hast scarce maintenance
To keep thee in fresh chamois.

MARCELLO Brother!

(III, 1, 34-48)

Marcello later responds

MARCELLO I'll interrupt you.
For love of virtue bear an honest heart,
And stride over every politic respect,
Which where they most advance they most infect.
Were I your father, as I am your brother,
I should not be ambitious to leave you
A better patrimony.

(III, 1 58-65).

Ordinary sibling links have been replaced by others - Flamineo is Vittoria's procurer, Marcello is Flamineo's abandoned conscience, and is also a prig. They have not become individuals with a mix of good and bad aspects, but seem instead to be stuck in exaggeratedly partial visions of the selves they might have become.

The story of this family perhaps has echoes for the Jacobean audience of changes which were disrupting many ordinary families. Vittoria, the 'Venetian courtesan', has sought to make her fortune from her looks, and by marrying into the lower reaches of the court, from which she now hopes to rise higher. Flamineo has attached himself to a nobleman in the ascendant, who is without principles. Cornelia, their mother, who has accompanied them to Rome, rails against them. On this occasion to Flamineo:

CORNELIA What? Because we are poor,

Shall we be vicious? (9I, 2, 312-313)

She conveys the sense that she has been left behind by her own children. In another Jacobean play, The Revenger's Tragedy scenes like this are represented explicitly as the ruin of the country gentry by the court, and perhaps there is a similar echo for audiences here.

Flamineo's later fatal quarrel with his brother Marcello also revolves around the possibility of sexual coupling being tolerated by a third party. Marcello assaults Zanche, Vittoria's Moorish maid, because she is claiming that Flamineo will marry her. His racist and sexist denunciation stirs Flamineo's identification with her:

MARCELLO You're a strumpet, an impudent one.
FLAMINEO Why do you kick her, say?
Do you think she's like a walnut tree,
Must she be cudgelled 'ere she bear good fruit?
MARCELLO She brags that you shall marry her.
FLAMINEO What then?
MARCELLO I would rather she were pitched upon a stake
In some new-seeded garden, to affright
Her fellow crows there.
FRANCISCO You're a boy, a fool,
Be guardian to your house; I am of age.
MARCELLO If I take her near you I'll cut her throat. (V, 1, 192-200)

Marcello, like Flamineo in his preoccupation with his sister's sexuality, cannot keep out of his brother's affairs. He offers a challenge, when Flamineo insults his legitimacy:

MARCELLO Now, by all my hopes,
Like the two slaughtered sons of Oedipus
The very flames of our affection

> Shall turn two ways. Those words I'll make thee answer
> With thy heart-blood. (V, 1, 206-209)

A few minutes later, Flamineo kills him. The violent hostility between the brothers is the outcome of intimacy gone mad. The feeling of brother for brother, which would be of sympathetic identification in more normal circumstances, is twisted into a desire for intrusive control on Marcello's side and a ruthless rejection of family relationship on Flamineo's part. The murder in fact takes place as Marcello is talking to Cornelia, their mother, which inflames Flamineo, now the outsider with respect to their moment of intimacy. The disintegration of this family, as the three siblings choose their own different path in life, two of them ignoring their mother, leaves each of its members desperate at one moment or another, as they realise that they have no-one they can depend on. The intolerance of all the characters in this play to the bearing of psychic pain is revealed repeatedly. Action has to be taken to evacuate it the minute it threatens to be felt.

The Duchess of Malfi (   )

Relationships between siblings are as central to this play, as they are to The White Devil. Once again, at the centre of the play are two brothers, Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal, and their sister the Duchess of Malfi. Ferdinand and the Duchess are twins, though anything further from the loving relationship between twins that we find for example in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night can hardly be imagined. [6]

Once again, as with The White Devil, the sexuality of the sister, the Duchess, is the central source of disturbance. It is the widowed Duchess's choice to make a second marriage with Antonio, her steward, whom she loves, which gives rise to the action of the play, and provokes her two brothers' murderous attacks on her. Bosola is hired as Ferdinand's agent, to spy on the Duchess, who at her brother's request gives him a position in her household. But where

Flamineo brings his sister and Brachiano together, as a go-between, hoping for reward for this service, Bosola is employed to destroy whatever sexual relationship the Duchess has made, and ends by directing her torture and murder. Like Flamineo, Bosola is vicariously excited and made envious by the pleasures and privileges he is obliged to observe from his excluded position. Even more than Flamineo, he learns in his role as onlooker and agent to understand those he watches.

Brothers and Sister

What is going on between brothers and sister in this play? The marriage of a woman is conventionally arranged by a father in this seventeenth century world. The brothers expect to inherit the right to dispose of her, but Webster's characterisation takes this beyond a standard depiction of male power and female helplessness. The Cardinal is cold and instrumental, and his sister is simply a cog in his schemes. He is an older brother in identification with a father-figure exercising total power. With Ferdinand we have a different picture. The twinship of Ferdinand and the Duchess, only revealed by Ferdinand late in the play, is important. We learn that she is the elder twin, and the dreadful pressure Ferdinand feels seems to be fuelled by a picture of his sister having it all - the sex, family life, and happiness in contrast to his own deprivation of joy. Can we not readily imagine a desperately envious and jealous baby boy Ferdinand, struggling with a conviction that his twin-sister, the first-born, is getting more or better than he? More attention, more affection, even more milk at the breast, perhaps.

Ferdinand's fevered sexual preoccupation with his sister's activities is usually interpreted as evidence of his incestuous longings. Certainly his response to her death makes us aware of the love which is turned to hate in all his cruel machinations. Perhaps one way of grasping his state of mind is to consider the way in which Oedipal issues are awakened for him when is sister is widowed. It is as if a widowed sister becomes available to him in his

---

[6] We have compared Shakespeare's Twelfth Night and Measure for Measure, as two

imagination, and the rage and disgust stirred up in him by her choice of a rival (Antonio) is rooted in his feelings of rejection and humiliation. The first husband was a necessity, a matter of dynastic interest, and seems to have been allowable in these terms. This is perhaps just as the small boy may wish to possess mother but simultaneously accept her place with father. But once father is gone, what is then to stand between him and mother (or in this case, sister) choosing *him*, the one who should obviously, from his viewpoint, be first choice? Shades of Hamlet's history come to mind. The intensity of extreme closeness and physical intimacy and jealousy that may inevitably be the lot of twins sets the scene here in a stark way. They have shared so much - even mother's womb - certainly her lap and her attention over all the early formative years: don't they belong together? How insulting to be set aside for someone else! The deprivation of actual maternal affection likely in aristocratic circles of the period would only intensify other attachments such as those between siblings.[7] There is a displacement of Oedipal affection from mother to sister in Ferdinand. Indeed it is her becoming a mother again (and again and again) which drives him quite mad. The evidence of her sexual activity and the birth of more and more rivals for her tender affections is unbearable to the deprived little boy hidden inside the vicious tyrant. Hence the hatred for the Duchess's children (he calls them her cubs) is as intense as for her, seen by Ferdinand as betrayer and violator of his love.

Although the Cardinal has a mistress (a courtesan whom he holds of no account and whom he eventually murders) another dimension of the Duchess's enemies is their homosexual gang-like connection, in which the hatred and coarse denunciation of women goes along with arrogant confidence in their righteousness and omnipotence. This is expressed by Webster's characters in brutally physical terms:

---

contrasting plays about sibling relationships, in Rustin and Rustin (2006).

[7] Examples in a different register are the intimacy of Beatrice and Hero, and Rosalind and Celia, in Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing and As You Like It. (Though their relationships are sisterly, these young women are in fact cousins who have grown up together.) Shakespeare explores what can happen when jealousy intervenes, in the quarrel between Helena and Hermia in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

FERDINAND I have this night digg'd up a mandrake.

CARDINAL Say you?

FERDINAND And I am grown mad with't.

CARDINAL What's the prodigy?

FERDINAND Read there, a sister damn'd, she's loose i'th'hilts:
Grown a notorious strumpet.

CARDINAL Speak lower.

FERDINAND Lower?
Rogues do not whisper't now, but seek to publish't,
As servants to the bounty of their lords,
Aloud, and with a covetous searching eye,
To mark who note them. O confusion seize her,
She hath had most cunning bawds to serve her turn,
And more secure conveyances for lust,
Than towns of garrison, for service.
....

CARDINAL Why do you make yourself
So wild a tempest?

FERDINAND 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 honour's.

CARDINAL Shall our blood?
The royal blood of Aragon and Castile,
Be thus attainted?

FERDINAND Apply desperate physic,
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.
There is a kind of pity in mine eye,
I'll give it to my hankercher; and not 'tis here
I'll bequeath it to her bastard.

CARDINAL What to do?

FERDINAND Why to make soft lint for his mother's wounds
When I have hew'd her to pieces.

Act 2, Scene 5, 1-11, 16-31)

Ferdinand is fascinated by his compulsive imaginings of his sister's sexual life. His outpouring of bile is prefigured by Bosola's filthy trick when he offers the Duchess the delicacy of new season's apricots, only to tell her that they have been ripened in horse dung and that she has eaten them unwashed. The desire to dirty and despoil her beauty and fertility binds Bosola to her brothers because they are all so intensely provoked by pleasures from which they feel excluded. The tortures they decide for her are all recycled versions of what they, and in particular Ferdinand, feel she has inflicted on them. (The mad people who are moved next door to her are also perhaps meant as a mocking example to her of the bourgeois commoners with whom she has polluted their aristocratic blood). Once the Duchess is dead, the Duke is afflicted by torments which mirror those she has endured - exposure to madness in particular. Indeed, in his madness he becomes deeply confused with the unmourned love-object, being caught 'under the shadow of the object', as Freud would write in *Mourning and Melancholia*. (Freud 1917). Klein's concept of projective identification (Klein 1946) has enabled us to understand more fully how this process of failed mourning functions to destroy a sense of reality. Allowing his sister to choose a husband seems to have required from Ferdinand a facing-up to Oedipal knowing which was unbearable to him, but once she is dead, his sanity swiftly collapses.

It is striking to see that the Oedipal triangle - the couple together with onlooker - is represented in a particularly concrete way in two opposing versions. Ferdinand's pornographic vision is contrasted with the intimate scene of the Duchess and Antonio in Cariola's company. The charming ease Cariola displays in her awareness of their wooing and later their sexual

enjoyment is the precise polar inversion of Ferdinand's horrible perspective. (Cariola is behind the arras, like Hamlet, but in order to be a benign witness to a love scene and to be its protector.)

DUCHESS Cariola,
To thy known secrecy I have given up more than my life, my fame.
CARIOLA Both shall be safe:
For I'll conceal this secret from the world
As warily as those that trade in poison,
Keep poison from their children.
DUCHESS Thy protestation
Is ingenious and hearty: I believe it. Is Antonio come?
CARIOLA He attends you.
DUCHESS Good dear soul,
Leave me: but place thyself behind the arras,
Where thou mayst overhear us: wish me good speed
For I am going into a wilderness,
Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew
To be my guide. (I, 2, 272-283).

And

DUCHESS Bring me the casket hither, and the glass;
You get no lodging here tonight, my lord.
ANTONIO Indeed, I must persuade one.
DUCHESS Very good:
I hope in time 'twill grow into a custom,
That noblemen shall come with cap and knee
To purchase a night's lodging of their wives.
ANTONIO I must lie here.
DUCHESS Must? You are a lord of mis-rule.
ANTONIO Indeed, my only rule is in the night.
DUCHESS To what use will you put me?

ANTONIO We'll sleep together.

DUCHESS Alas, what pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?

CARIOLA My lord, I lie with her often: and I know
She'll oft disquiet you.

ANTONIO See, you are complain'd of.

CARIOLA For she's the sprawling'st bedfellow

ANTONIO I shall like her the better for that.

CARIOLA Sir, shall I ask you a question?

ANTONIO I pray thee, Cariola.

CARIOLA Wherefore still, when you lie with my lady,
Do you rise so early?

ANTONIO Labouring men,
Count the clock oft'nest Cariola,
Are glad when their task's ended.

DUCHESS I'll stop your mouth (*kisses him)*

ANTONIO Nay, that's but one, Venus had two soft doves
To draw her chariot: I must have another (*kisses her).*
When wilt thou marry, Cariola?

CARIOLA Never, my lord.

ANTONIO O fie upon this single life: forego it. ....

(Act 3, Scene 2, 1-24)

Webster thus presents us with a couple in love as both generating love, for their three children, and in Cariola who is passionately loyal to her mistress, but also provoking dangerous extremes of jealous rage. In this play the forces of hatred easily destroy domestic bliss, and the absence of safe spaces for the pursuit of private passions is linked to the permanent presence of the spy. The power of the malevolent eye - of poisoned vision, a way of seeing continually fed by hostile and degrading propaganda - is overwhelming. The eye that observes in this crooked way can destroy almost the entire world.
No doubt the role of the spy in the political life of his time is a point of departure for Webster, but his special perception links the impulse to spy to

intrusive desires to control by obtaining secret stolen knowledge of what should be hidden, and thence to a ruthless totalitarianism. The desire to see or more broadly put to get to know one's parental objects and to be able to perceive their relationship in one's mind is thus shown to be a powerful impulse (this is Klein 's epistemophilic instinct) (Klein 1921, 1928, 1930, 1931) which can be driven by very different impulses. The sad Duchess of this play is the victim of a lust for knowledge which is only satisfied by the extreme possession involved in murder - a lifeless body may be perceived as wholly possessed by the killer who only at that moment can become aware of his loss.

Bosola the Spy

Let's give some further attention to Bosola, whom Duke Ferdinand employs to spy on his sister the Duchess. Bosola is a former soldier, who has spent years as a prisoner in the galleys for crimes committed in the Cardinal's service. He has returned to seek preferment, and is recognised by the brothers to be dishonest and intelligent enough (unlike Antonio, as the Cardinal observes) to serve their purposes. Ferdinand obtains for him the 'provisorship of horse' in the Duchess's palace, which she unwisely agrees to, though she knows she is about to defy and provoke her brothers. It is Bosola, a close observer of everything and everyone, who discovers that she has borne a child, and later two further children, and it is he also, by a typical strategem in which his grasp of truth is perverted for evil purposes, who discovers that Antonio is the Duchess's husband and the father of their children.

Bosola has praised Antonio's goodness and integrity after the Duchess, to protect her family, has publicly proclaimed Antonio a thief and pretended to dismiss him from her service. The Duchess, in relief at Bosola's apparent recognition of his goodness, tells Bosola that Antonio is her husband, and even imagines that he will now help them. But Bosola instead organises the arrest, torture, and execution of the Duchess, and two of her children and

Cariola their nurse as well. When he asks Duke Ferdinand for his reward at the end of this work of horror, he is held to blame for what he has done, and he is sent away with nothing. At this point he repents his deeds, and seeks revenge on Ferdinand and the Cardinal.

On the surface, one can read Bosola as a wholly instrumental villain, a man without morals, seeking his fortune in a state of mind of utter cynicism. On this reading, he turns from Ferdinand only because he is denied the reward due to him. But he is an emotionally complex figure, and for this reason one of the most fascinating characters in Jacobean tragedy. As a failed outsider, desperately seeking a place in the privileged world, he becomes identified in different ways with both Ferdinand, his employer and master, and with Antonio, also a former soldier and an inferior in the eyes of the court, who has found the position which Bosola would have liked to have. Where Antonio lives inside, as the Duchess's steward, Bosola is left outside, with the horses. 'Say then my corruption/Grew out of horse dung. I am your creature,' he says earlier to Ferdinand. At one crisis of near-discovery he is literally locked out of the palace, and is kept sufficiently far from the Duchess's private quarters that he fails at first to discover her secret marriage.

Yet Bosola has an intense fascination with the Duchess, and with her sexuality. Although he is to serve as the eyes and ears of Ferdinand his master, much of himself is invested in his keen observation and aroused feelings. Bosola is someone who is compelled to live his life as a spectator ('an intelligencer'), and either to indefinitely defer his pleasures or gain them in voyeuristic ways. He is perceptive about other people, and uses his empathy with them to engage them as if he was their friend, whilst another part of his mind remains wholly calculating and detached. Ferdinand thanks him for telling him the truth, and tells him he never hired anyone who was not his flatterer before. The Duchess, in her captivity and torture, talks with him, in his different disguises, vizarded, as an old man, and as the bellman

bringing her to her death, enjoying in him someone who understands her and her desperate circumstances.

As Bosola carries out Ferdinand's instructions to inflict suffering, despair and madness (as he hopes) on the Duchess, Bosola plays his assigned parts with aplomb and imagination, but at the same time is moved by the Duchess's beauty and integrity. He questions Ferdinand, and tries to restrain him. 'Why do you do this ? he asks him. He says, in his growing feeling of shame, that he will no longer appear before the Duchess undisguised - but he nevertheless obeys the Duke's instructions to the end, brutally organising the executions. When he then goes to Ferdinand to report that the Duchess is dead, more is at issue for him than his claim for reward. He has lived and embodied Ferdinand's vindictiveness, jealousy and hatred for his sister. He has translated these feelings into action, as the sadistic but weak Duke could not do for himself. What Bosola needs at this moment is recognition of what they have shared together in their minds, all that Bosola has been willing to take on and carry out on his master's behalf. Instead, the Duke disowns him, even asking him what laws sanctioned his actions. Bosola is to be cast out to bear the intolerable guilt alone. It is at this point that Bosola comes to see the full meaning of what he has done. He now becomes the avenger, for the Duchess as well as himself, though we can see this reversal of allegiance as another flight from unbearable guilt into action. The Duke, without someone into whom he can project his vicious feelings, and with their main object dead, now collapses into madness. We can see here another version of a twin relationship.

Bosola is a character whose nature those dispositions described by Bion (1962) as Love, Hate, and Knowledge (L, H and K in his notation) are perversely entwined, under the domination of resentful and jealous hate. For most of the play, it is in the service of hate that his extraordinary intelligence, and even qualities of empathy, are deployed. In describing certain kinds of compulsive criminality, in which the criminal is drawn to his

offence by the 'lure' or 'glamour' given to its object by phantasy, Richard Wollheim (1993) refers to a kind of perverse 'solicitude' which certain serial murderers seem to have shown to their victims, even as they plan their deaths. Affection and understanding are felt towards these victims, even though the overwhelming drive is of hatred towards them and a wish for their destruction. This description seems to characterise Bosola's state of mind, as he implements the torture of the Duchess, though as her suffering proceeds, and he comes to know her, the balance of his feelings changes, and he then mourns her death and wonders how he could have been its willing agent.

Court Society

The climate of the court society in The Duchess of Malfi is exceptionally malevolent and toxic. This is obviously manifest in the characters and behaviour of the two brothers, the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand, and of their agent Bosola. But the atmosphere of corruption pervades their entire circle. Even the Duchess's retinue abandon and denigrate Antonio when she feigns her denunciation of him - Bosola explain to her that this is what is to be expected from courtiers. Legitimate authority, in the form of the Pope and the state of Ancona are readily suborned by the Cardinal, and they pronounce banishment on the Duchess and her children even as they present themselves at a holy shrine.

Even more disturbing, however, is the way that the Duchess herself adapts to this degraded political world. Even her initial way of deciding to defy her brothers in pursuing her love for Antonio – a straightforward deception of them – indicates her lack of confidence that she could proceed in an open way. Her decision to marry Antonio privately, with only Cariola as a witness, and to keep their marriage secret for many years, even when she has borne three children by her husband, follows the secretive style of her brothers, though in a better cause. When she is at risk of discovery, her decision to denounce her husband Antonio, and send him away, takes a path of lies and deceit, at the cost of publicly shaming Antonio. This is so painful an

experience for her than she is immediately induced to confess the true situation to Bosola, with the terrible consequences of her arrest that then follow. Only when she is confronted unexpectedly in her bedroom by Ferdinand her twin brother, and violently threatened and abused by him, does she disclose that she is married, but even then she does not tell Ferdinand that Antonio is her husband. She and Antonio pay a high price for their concealment of the truth. Antonio tells Delio that the people regard her as 'a strumpet', since they know she has had three children, and believe them to be illegitimate. Antonio is believed to have used his household office to enrich himself at the Duchess's expense. His abandonment by the court when the Duchess denounces him thus has a background in envy and hostility, unmitigated by recognition of his real and honourable partnership with the Duchess.

The Duchess's choices to opt for secrecy and deception have various aspects. Although Bosola puts into words the opinion that noble birth is less important than qualities of character, and the Duchess is pleased to hear this, this is not a view that she is herself able to articulate. Her secret marriage, and even her apparent rejection of Antonio at a moment of great fear express her own ambivalence about marrying beneath her station.[8] In the bedroom scene, which portrays loving sexual intimacy, Antonio protests, not entirely playfully, that he rules only at night, in their bed, and is described by the Duchess as a 'lord of misrule'. While affectionate, this reveals the disjunction between their public and their private selves. The suspicion that she is led in her choice of partner by lust alone – in modern terms that Antonio is a kind of kept man – is invited in her social milieu by the Duchess's refusal to make her marriage a public fact. [9]

---

[8] It is indeed possible to see the Duke's incestuous feelings towards his sister, and his hatred of her imagined lovers, also as an extreme version of anxieties about blood-pollution which may be an inherent risk in social systems which depend on hereditary transmission of rank. Haven't marriages between cousins been common among the royal families of Europe?

[9] Lisa Jardine (1983) in her interesting reflections on this play, comments that in the end the Duchess's challenge to patriarchal convention peters out, as she retreats in her suffering from her earlier assertion of independence into the role of loving mother, bereaved widow, and Christian martyr.

Another possibility, contributing to her untenable situation, is that the incestuous passion which Ferdinand, her twin brother has for her, entangles her too, because she cannot bear to fully separate herself from him. Keeping her marriage secret is a way of avoiding open confrontation with her brother's intense preoccupation with her, while still allowing her to pursue her own sexual fulfilment.

The Duchess remains trapped within her family's aristocratic way of thinking. She is brave enough to defy the authoritarian rules that imprison women, but cannot articulate any alternative to them. At the most extreme moment of her torture and suffering, when she affirms her continuing identity to the disguised Bosola, it is her noble status that she affirms. 'I am the Duchess of Malfi still.' Antonio's ineffectiveness – his own pathetic underestimation of the wickedness and ruthlessness of the powerful - also underlines the absence in this play of any alternative social vision. The only figure clear-sighted enough to understand and articulate these issues, Bosola, is himself trapped by the resentment and cynicism which this system engenders.

Conclusion

In Webster's two great tragedies, the disintegration of an imagined society has as its concomitant the breakdown into murderous violence of relationships between siblings. The brothers and sisters of The White Devil observe their corrupt social order from below, as Flamineo and Vittoria Corombona scheme together to gain a favoured position within it. When they are defeated, they turn upon each other, Vittoria with her usual courage and lucidity, Flamineo with greedy vindictiveness. The brothers and sisters of The Duchess of Malfi already belong in the higher reaches of this world, as a Duke, a Cardinal and a Duchess. But the Duke and the Cardinal lack any moral feeling, or belief that moral obligations go with their status. They exist only to gratify their own pleasures, and to accumulate further power. The Duchess is capable of love, but she is split between a private self which can enjoy a 'modern' kind of experience of marriage and parenthood, and a

conventional public role as a great lady. The brothers in particular are trapped in an exclusionary world in which their inferiors are there only to be used (as spies, agents, concubines) but are at the same time feared for the claims – not least sexual claims – that they might make on their privileges of birth. One can see that the jealous passion of twin brother for sister, though feared as dangerously mad by the Duchess's elder brother, does serve a fantasied social as well as a sexual purpose, to exclude all but blood relations from access to inherited power.

From what position does Webster explore the degradation and corruption of the social order he presents on his stage? He is not deeply identified with responsible, legitimate, patriarchal government, as Shakespeare seems to be. Many of Shakespeare's plays end with some kind of restoration of such a legitimate state of affairs, however much a play's preceding action has put this in question. Such restorations are invariably founded on bonds of kinship. No such reassurance is offered by Webster, or by his contemporary Jacobean playwrights. A degraded world is repeatedly brought down by the cumulative force of its own corruption. As in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, the best as well as the worst are destroyed. The fate of the better – Vittoria Corombona, perhaps, in The White Devil, certainly the Duchess of Malfi - offer no hint of possibility of a more benign outcome – they are themselves trapped within the patterns of thought and action that destroy them.

Perhaps the location from which these plays are written is indeed that of the onlookers, agents, and spies - Flamineo and Bosola are examples - who are so central to their action. Here are people who can clearly see how degraded their world is, but can find no better way of surviving in it. Their formidable capacities for understanding – their 'epistemophilic instincts' – have become dissociated from concern. In fact, their knowledge of the evil proclivities of those holding power only leads to perverse identification with

them, and to vicarious enjoyment of their misdeeds. These outsiders or hangers-on to power can chronicle, exploit, and live off, corruption, but find no-one of consequence to identify themselves with who are not themselves corrupted. (Bosola is changed by his deeper knowledge of the Duchess, but too late). Perhaps there are chroniclers and critics who occupy comparable roles within our own society and its media.

Psychoanalytically, one might put this issue in a different way. Shakespeare, it seems, arranged the endings of many of his plays from the perspective of the parental poles of the Oedipal triangle. In the reverse Oedipus Complex experienced by parents, many of his central figures manage to achieve a containing space in which a future of some sort is enabled to happen. Prospero achieves this with a struggle in The Tempest, King Lear mourns his failure to do so, Duke Vincentio manages to patch something together in Measure for Measure, the couples of Twelfth Night arrive at the threshold of these parental roles. Webster views the world from the opposite pole of the Oedipal struggle, from the vantage-point of abused and excluded children who have been suborned by corrupted parental figures to abet them in their own venal designs. This does not bring a reassuring view of the social order, in Webster's society or indeed in our own.

References

Alford, C. Fred (1993) The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy: New Haven: Yale.

Bion, W.R. (1962) Learning from Experience. London: Heinemann.

Coles, P. (2003) The Importance of Sibling Relationships in Psychoanalysis. London: Karnac.

Coles, P. (ed) (2006) On Sibling Relationships, edited by Prophecy Coles. London: Karnac.

Houzel, D. (2001) The 'nest of babies fantasy.' *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* 27, 2. August 2001.

Jardine, L., (1983) 'The Duchess of Malfi: A Case Study in the Literary Representation of Women." In Susanne Kappeler and Norman Bryson, eds., Teaching the Text , pp. 203-217. London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Klein, M. (1921) 'The Development of a Child', in Klein M. (1975) Love, Guilt and Other Works 1921-45.. London: Hogarth Press.

Klein, M. (1928) 'The Early Stages of the Oedipus Complex, in Klein, M. (1975) op. cit.

Mitchell, J. (2000) Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming hysteria and the effects of sibling relations on the human condition. London: Penguin.

Mitchell, J. (2003) Siblings. Cambridge: Polity.

Money-Kyrle, R. (1968) 'Cognitive Development', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49, pp 691-698.

Moretti, F. (1983) Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms. London: Verso.

Rustin, M.E. and M.J. (2002), Mirror to Nature: Drama, Psychoanalysis and Society. Karnac, 2002. Italian edition, translated by Silvia Artoni, Passioni in Scena. Roma: Bruno Mondadori (2005.)

Rustin, M.E. and M.J. (2006) 'The Siblings of Measure for Measure and Twelfth Night' , in On Sibling Relationships, edited by Prophecy Coles. London: Karnac.

Simon, B. (1988) Tragic Drama and the Family: Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett. New Haven: Yale.

Warshow, R.(2002) The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture. Revised ed Cambridge Mass. Harvard University Press.

Webster, John. (1972) Three Plays (The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil's Law Case) Introduction and Notes by D.C. Gunby. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Wollheim, R.(1993) 'Crime, Punishment, and "Pale Criminality", in The Mind and its Depths: Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press.