

"The Most Cunning and Curious Musick...Out of Discords":

John Webster's Tragicomic Endings.

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SUMMARY

When a play ends, the audience must make a complicated readjustment from their absorption in the enacted fiction to their return to real life. In Jacobean tragicomedy a double readjustment must be made. The last act of the play inverts the facts that the play-world seems to have established: the audience must adjust from one fiction to another, and then the play must return them altogether from fiction to their places in the theatre. The tragicomic dramatist must help the audience through this maze of fictions and back to the workaday world, and he does this by describing the play's genre and its fictional nature, by analysing its rhetoric, and by presenting images of play and masque, actors and audience. The tragicomedies of Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher and others seem to establish a special relationship with their audience. Play after play presents the audience, directly or indirectly, by means of induction, prologue and epilogue, or the play within the play. Final acts are especially rich in this kind of imagery as the author leads the audience out of the play. Jacobean tragicomedy was so popular in its own day because of the wide range of emotions it encompassed, and partly because of its double vision, its ability simultaneously to use and to parody its own rhetoric and conventions. Perhaps most important, it was popular because of this intimate relationship it established with its audience: the audience is used as a dramatic character. The plays of John Webster, tragedies as well as tragicomedies, seem to use particularly

fruitfully the conventions of tragicomedy. The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi as well as The Devil's Law-case and A Cure for a Cuckold present burlesque of tragedy, use extensively the language of comedy, juxtapose the genres, and are sceptical about the rhetoric of tragedy. Especially important, the end of the play mediates for the audience between the fiction and the return to fact by images of acting and audience, descriptions of genre, and discussions of the nature of drama.

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Now if any aske, Why I have shut up and contruded within a narrow roome, many large Histories, not delating them with everie plenary circumstance? I answer, That therein I have imitated Aelianus de Var. Hist. and Valer. Maxim., who epitomised great and memorable acts, reducing and contracting into a compendious Method wide and loose Histories, giving them notwithstanding their full weight, in few words. Some also may cavill, that I have not introduced them in order, neither Alphabetically, nor according to custome or precedent; which I thus excuse: The most cunning and curious Musick is that which is made out of discords ... It may likewise be objected, Why amongst sad and grave Histories, I have here and there inserted fabulous Jeasts and Tales, savouring of Lightnesse? I answer, I have therein imitated our Historicall and Comickall Poets, that write to the stage: who least the Auditorie should be dulled with serious courses ... in everie Act present some Zanie with his Mimick action, to breede in the lesse capable, mirth and laughter: For they that write to all, must strive to please all.

Thomas Heywood, Gunaikeion: or, Nine Bookes of Various History. Concerning Women ... (1624), epistle to the Reader.

INTRODUCTION

When at the end of Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde Troilus is killed by the pitiless Achilles, his death is treated not as a personal tragedy but as an act which enables him, and the reader, to see the events of the poem in a clearer perspective. Troilus' spirit rises to heaven and looks down upon "this litel spot of erthe" (Book V, 1. 1815). From his new point of vantage he is amused at the blindness of mankind,

And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste

(V. 1821-2).

The poem then turns to Chaucer's readers, "yonge, fresshe folkes" (V. 1835), and urges them to love God and not to seek "feynede loves" (V. 1848). The medieval poet, secure in his Christian vision, found no problem in ending his poem significantly. The poem's return from the limited world of weeping humanity to the universal world of the spirit and the power of God forms a parallel to the reader's return from the circumscribed world of the fiction to real life. For the Elizabethan or Jacobean playwright the situation was more complicated: he very rarely uses this switch from the human to the divine viewpoint except ironically; as Marlowe does in Dr. Faustus. The Renaissance dramatist had to find other ways to suggest at the end of the enactment the differences between the theatrical fiction and real life, and to help the audience to readjust from the controlled perspectives of the play to the more chaotic perspectives of the workaday world.

The problem of the kind of assistance which the play should give its audience in the readjustment to real life seems especially central in tragicomedy. Here the surprises in the final act and the disruption of the facts which the play had seemed to present provide an image of the audience's readjustment from fiction to fact. Tragicomedy seem particularly interested in consciously manipulating the audience, presenting it with images of itself and of the whole process of enactment, and nowhere is this more important than in the final act.

Critical distaste for tragicomedy lingers on. Critics tend to find these plays "frivolous"¹, "blurred"², or "decadent"³, usually without explaining in any detail what they mean by these terms. It seems curious that an audience which enjoyed The Tempest, Bussy d'Ambois or the comedies of Jonson should have been so enthusiastic about a whole body of frivolous, blurred and decadent plays. Certainly Jacobean tragicomedies tell good stories well: there is always a rich variety of things to look at and to listen to. I shall try to suggest other good qualities of Jacobean tragicomedy apart from this narrative power, and to suggest why the genre was so popular in the age of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Webster.

The observation that Webster's tragedies were influenced by the development of tragicomedy is not a new one. J.R. Mulryne has written an interesting article, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedy"⁴, which does not in fact mention The Devil's Law-case and A Cure for a Cuckold, but which does compare Webster's tragedies with plays like King Lear, The Revenger's Tragedy, Waiting for Godot and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, all of which "approximate ... tragicomic experience"⁵. However there is still no extended treatment of Webster's tragicomedies, and no detailed

examination of the ways in which the tragedies use the language and structures of Jacobean tragicomedy.

I have chosen to look at Webster's use of tragicomedy by concentrating on play endings, where the problems posed by tragicomedy are most acute, and where critics have most often condemned or misunderstood the plays. Why does Flamineo stage a mock version of his own death in the last scene of The White Devil? Why does The Duchess of Malfi continue for so long after the death of the heroine? Why does the last act of The Devil's Law-case shuffle the established relationships and stage its curious masque? It is with questions like this that I have been concerned.

It may be objected that the process of readjustment at the ending of plays that I shall describe is so complicated that the audience in the theatre simply cannot be aware of it in any detail, and that the author by loading his endings with these effects is losing the play's plot and characters in over-ingenious self-consciousness. It seems to me, though, that the audience in the theatre is potentially in an extremely receptive state. S.L. Bethall, for instance, has suggested that because of the "principle of multiconsciousness" it is possible for an audience "to respond simultaneously and unconsciously on more than one plane of attention at the same time"⁶. This, he continues is especially important in "the mixture of comedy and tragedy" which, he claims, "is founded psychologically on the popular audience's ability to shift rapidly its modes of attention".⁷ If Bethell is right the audience would seem to be capable of viewing the end of the play simultaneously with involvement and detachment, and of appreciating the complicated interchanges of metaphorical and literal modes, fiction and reality.

More recently, Stephen Orgel has written persuasively of the readjustment the audience must make at the end of the masque, and how the writers of the masque must help with this readjustment. The masque as the form which above all directly involves its audience in allegory, dance and compliment, makes openly that mediating movement from fiction to real life that, I shall suggest, the plays make perhaps more indirectly. Orgel suggests, for instance, that the early part of Love Restored succeeds because, by the steps from fact to fiction provided by the boy actor playing Cupid who turns out to be "really" Plutus, god of wealth, "We have been led with remarkable ease from the world of the court to the world of fable"⁸. Orgel, though, suggests that the leading of the audience from the fable to the court at the end of the masque is less successful. "The inevitable problem of moving back to the court"⁹ is imperfectly solved because Jonson does not relate the two worlds and does not allow the ending to mediate sufficiently clearly between the fiction and real life.

Orgel moreover suggests that the masques where Jonson most convincingly succeeds in solving "the problem of moving back to the court" are Neptune's Triumph and Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue. In the former, the court is led out of the fable by the direct relation between the fiction and real life - "the allegory is ... directly concerned with actual and familiar facts"¹⁰ of Prince Charles' return to England from his Spanish journey. In this masque

It is not enough for the audience to be passive observers. In effect the masque has ceased to be a spectacle and has managed to make its audience integral to its action.¹¹

In Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue Jonson creates a hero, Hercules,

who can help the audience with this final readjustment. He mediates for us between the antimasque and the masque since he "can enter the world of misrule, assess it, and lead us from it into the masque"¹². Later, as the fiction ends and is replaced by dancing and the direct involvement of the audience, Hercules "becomes a spectator"¹³ and is replaced at the centre of the play by the audience.

The audience is now no longer separated from the image of perfection ... The dance and all it represents are no longer part of a theatrical illusion but an evident reality.¹⁴

At its first performance, King James complained about the quality of the dancing. Orgel suggests that the king, whom the masque used as a mediating symbol, a figure belonging both to the fiction and to real life,

returned the contemporary audience to the realities of life at court rather abruptly, but ... only a little earlier than the masque itself.¹⁵

The king's impromptu performance contributed to the audience's readjustment to life outside the fiction of the masque.

If the masque, the most ephemeral of enacted fictions, can involve the audience in the complex readjustment to fact as the performance ends, it seems legitimate to seek the same effects in the plays, especially since so many of the plays I shall consider, The Malcontent, As You Like It, The Tempest, The Devil's Law-case, even The White Devil, use the masque in the final act as a short-hand way of suggesting the problems of ending and of readjustment. A play which has involved the audience for the two hour traffic of the stage in compelling emotions and actions might be expected to find the problems of readjustment at least as difficult as a masque, which has involved its audience primarily in poetic abstractions, spectacle, and music.

Although I have looked especially at tragicomedy in its relationship with the audience and in its presentation of images of play, audience and enactment, I would wish to dissociate myself from the "metatheatre" or "metadrama"¹⁶ group of critics. A play which is about a play and nothing else would be astonishingly sterile: but a play can intensify its poignancy, suspense or fun by discussing its own mechanism and by reminding us of the precariousness of fiction and of our own role as audience. I am certainly not concerned with a new or separate genre of plays about plays¹⁷: images of play and audience and discussions of genre seem to have been part of the theatrical tradition for as long as there has been a theatrical tradition. I would finally see Webster not as a "metadramatist" but as the author of four uniquely challenging plays, plays which refuse tidy generic forms and which engage their audience in the complexity, indecisiveness and inconsistency of real experience.

NOTES

1. Una Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (1936), p.183..
2. Clifford Leech, John Webster (1951), p.91.
3. T.B. Tomlinson, A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy (1964), p.215, sees tragicomedy as a sign of the "decadence" of the drama.
4. J.R. Mulryne, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedy" (John Webster, Brian Morris ed., 1970).
5. Mulryne, op. cit., p.135.
6. S.L. Bethell, Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition (1944), p.29.
7. Bethell, op. cit., p.108.
8. Stephen Orgel, The Jonsonian Masque (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p.74.
9. Orgel, op. cit., p.75.
10. Orgel, op. cit., p.95.
11. Orgel, op. cit., p.95.
12. Orgel, op. cit., p.162.
13. Orgel, op. cit., p.177.
14. Orgel, op. cit., p.183.
15. Orgel, op. cit., p.183.
16. E.g. Lionel Abel, author of Metatheatre (NY 1963) and J.L. Calderwood, author of Shakesperian Metadrama (Minneapolis 1971). Abel defines "metaplays, works of metatheatre" (p.61) as "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalised" (p.60).

17. Calderwood, op. cit., defines metatheatre as "a dramatic genre that goes beyond drama ... becoming a kind of anti-form in which the boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved" (p.4).

CHAPTER ONE

"But mixed, like the tragic comedies":

tragicomedy, the tragicomic ending, and the audience.

The origins of Jacobean tragicomedy

As Allardyce Nicoll has pointed out, drama, to a greater extent than other arts, includes attempts to define its own fictional status. This "steady trend towards the indication of dramatic categories"¹ led Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists to formulate genre-descriptions intended to be more precise than "tragedy" or "comedy", terms which became increasingly devalued as the period progressed.² This attempt at further definition is most obvious in the transitional genres. F.H. Ristine points out that the genre-term "History" was frequently used in and around the 1590s, especially by Greene, as a synonym for "romantic tragicomedy".³ Other plays are even more explicit about their ambiguous standing between tragedy and comedy. Thomas Preston's Cambyses (1567), for instance, is presented as "a Lamentable Tragedie, mixed full of plesant mirth"⁴. Nathaniel Woodes' The Conflict of Conscience (1572) is provided with alternate endings, a clear sign that the plot is felt to have both tragic and comic possibilities. The play is based on "an history" (Prologue, 1.26) and would therefore seem to have tragedy's truth of argument, but the author considers such specific reference out of place in his "Comedy" (prol.1s 38,53) and therefore gives the central character a generic rather than a particular name. Finally, the prologue twice calls the play a "Comedy", but on the

other hand it contains incidents worthy of tragedy, "too too dolorous" (1.64). Shakespeare's burlesque of such attempts at critical definition - "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral", "very tragical mirth", "the most lamentable comedy"⁵ - points out their cumbersomeness. As early as the 1560s these terms were rivalled by the more precise and compact "tragical comedy" and finally "tragicomedy".

Although Aristotle described a kind of tragedy with a happy ending which was later to be seen as tragicomic⁶, the earliest surviving definitions of tragicomedy are Roman. The word "tragi-(co)comedia" seems to have been coined by Plautus⁷ to describe, half jocularly, a play which reduces a god to a cuckold and a hero to a cuckold before giving a new perspective on the incident as a mystic celebration for the birth of Hercules, a drama which mixes gods and heroes and witty slaves, and which encompasses a comic incident of seduction and misunderstanding with a terrifying sense of impending madness and the loss of identity. Seneca, despite his own experiments to create a distinctively Roman tragedy, recognised the essentially mixed nature of his contemporary drama - "our native Roman drama (which has a serious element as well and stands halfway between comedy and tragedy) ..."⁸ Critics in Elizabethan England might have described their native drama in the same terms, though few of them were as tolerant of this state of affairs as Seneca. Sir Philip Sidney condemns "mongrel tragi-comedy", using the genre-term to describe plays which injudiciously mix kings and clowns, and "match hornpipes and funerals."⁹ Later John Florio described the prevailing dramatic modes as "neither right comedies nor right tragedies ... Representations of histories, without any decorum"¹⁰. This essentially mixed nature of Elizabethan drama

found its fullest and most explicit expression in the development and definition of formal tragicomedy in the works of Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher, and their successors.

However the mixed play's tendency to define categories is particularly noticeable in four plays of the latter half of the sixteenth century, plays which are especially careful to explain their descriptions of themselves because of their consciousness that they are using unfamiliar terminology. R.B.'s Apus and Virginia (c1564), Richard Edwardes' Damon and Pythias (1565) and George Gascoigne's The Glass of Government (1575) call themselves "tragicall comedye", and Samuel Brandon's strange play The Virtuous Octavia (1598) is the first in English to use the genre-term "Tragicomoedi". All four plays are particularly liberal in their use of the various genre-terms and attempt to describe with unusual precision their mixed nature.

Although Ristine, adopting a hint of Guarini's, sees Tudor tragical comedy as "a form of comedy"¹¹, these plays seem more akin to tragedy. The Virtuous Octavia relates the potentially tragic story at one remove: Anthony and Cleopatra never appear, and the centre of the play is the rational and controlled Octavia. The play rejects "tragedies", which are seen as the result of the victory of "traytor passion" (2.1): the second chorus warns that "Affection is the savage beast" which "still our good destroyeth". Although Brandon offers no definition of his genre-term, he uses it to refer to tragic events viewed from outside, their tragic passion undercut by a rigorous Christian stoicism. Perhaps Brandon knew Guarini's work on tragicomedy. Although this play is so very different from Guarini's dramatic practices, Brandon also appears to believe that the Christian world no longer needs the catharsis which tragedy

supplied, the strange blend of pain and pleasure experienced in the enactment of a tragedy¹².

Brandon does not explain his choice of a genre-term: R.B. in Apus and Virginia seems unhappy with his nomenclature. Although the title-page of the 1575 edition calls the play a "Tragicall Comedie", the prologue simplifies this to "this tragidie" (1.19). R.B. writes securely within the tradition of Christian tragicomedy. The plays of the tenth century nun Hroswitha for instance attempt to reconcile farce, martyrdom and moralising, and the language of Terentian comedy. In Dulcitius the martyrdom of the three Christian maidens is directly presented as a source of mixed feelings -

Hinc mihi quam maxime gaudendum/tibi vero dolendum (XIV.3)

Moreover the play itself incorporates farce as a way of describing the futility and lack of dignity of evil: the lustful Dulcitius fondles pots and pans instead of the Christian women. R.B.'s play presents a similar mixture of farce and danger, grief and joy. The play ends with the death of Virginia, but the prologue announces the play's double concern as both tragedy and comedy: its subject is Virginia's "doller and her dolefull losse and yet her joyes at death" (1.17). The play consistently undercuts its use of the elements of tragedy. Virginia's death is placed at some distance from the end of the play and is presented by Memory and Fame as a spiritual triumph. The lively parodic comedy of Haphazard modifies our reaction, even in the last scene, to the guilt of Apus and its disastrous consequences. The play moves from a fictional story to a generalised and abstract statement of the significance of the story as Virginia becomes "Dame Beuty" (881), "the virgin chaste" (883). The author finally admits the fictional nature of the play, so that the whole story of passion and pain is seen in retrospect as

simply a dramatic re-enactment, "this Poets faining here" (1025). In The Virtuous Octavia and Aprius and Virginia the events of tragedy are given a significance which is not tragic, and the framework of tragedy is modified by the use of debate and discussion, by a foreshortening of the tragic ending, and by the refusal of the heroine to accept tragedy and tragic passion.

The other two tragical comedies of the period are closer to comedy and to Madeleine Doran's definition of tragicomedy as "A combination of the serious action of tragedy with the happy ending of comedy"¹³. At the same time, however, each is at least as aware of tragedy as of comedy. Gascoigne's heavy Calvinist prodigal-son morality The Glass of Government presents itself as "A Comedie" (Prologue 1.21)¹⁴. but goes on to undercut its own definition - "No Terence phrase: his tyme and myne are twaine" (1.22). The play contrasts its own "true discourse" (Prologue 1.14) with the "Enterlude" designed "to make you laugh" (1.9), "Italian toyes" (1.10), and bawdy "Playne speache" (1.11). Gascoigne's play seems to distrust not only its framework of comedy but even its dramatic form: even the "worthie Jest" (Prologue 1.1) of dramatic comedy is no more than "vayne delight" (1.2). According to the title page the play is "A tragicall Comedie so entituled, bycause therein are handled as well the rewardes for Vertues as also the punishment for Vices". The good end happily and the bad unhappily: this for Gascoigne is what tragicomedy means. The ending of the play like the prologue distances itself from comedy by stressing the dark side of the tragicomic synthesis, as it redefines itself as a "wofull tragicall comedy (p.88). Although the ending includes the comic success of the two good sons, the author suggests that the audience is to react as to a tragedy, to "wring [their] handes" rather than applaud. The

play seems to belong to a deliberately neutral ground with allegience neither to tragedy nor to comedy: its multiplied images of the central experience in sermons, included poems, parody and choral commentary stress the play's equivocal use of tragedy and of comedy.

Of the tragical comedies of the period Richard Edwardes' Damon and Pythias¹⁵ with its last-minute rescue from death, its discussion of friendship and fidelity, and its many comic scenes, is closest to the norm which tragicomedy was to attain in the works of Beaumont and Fletcher and Marston. The play's prologue describes its subject-matter as "mixed with mirth and care ... a tragicall comedye" (ls 37-38), and the title-page promises "the most Excellent Comedy of Two the Most Faithfullest Friends". The play certainly sees itself as a kind of comedy, with comic scenes of the gulling of Grim the Collier and of the "worldly friendship" (1.141) of Aristippus and Carisophus, both of which parody the "true friendship" (1.142) and trust of the heroes. However, although Edwardes recognises that the basic treatment of the play is comic¹⁶, he insists that it is a comedy of a rather subdued and serious kind: the audience is warned not to expect "toys ... in comicall wise" (ls. 3-4), for the author insists that he has given up "toying plays" (1.6). The play then claims to be a comedy of a special kind, a "tragical comedy" (1.38). However, although the prologue so clearly sees the play as comedy of a kind, the dramatic image used most frequently in the play itself is that of tragedy. Stephano sees Pythias' danger as "this Tragidy" (1.1112), and finally the converted tyrant Dionysius sees the escape of the friends from death as "this Tragidy" (1.2131), a didactic tragedy acted out to teach Dionysius the virtues of friendship and right rule¹⁷. The

play's Fletcherian conclusion of averted danger sums up its mixed nature, making free use of the word "tragedy" but modifying the implications of the term by comic episodes, by songs, and by debate about virtue and friendship.

The four plays of the period 1564 to 1598 which explicitly claim tragicomic status for themselves have certain qualities in common. All, except the anomalous Tragicomoedi of the Virtuous Octavia mix noblemen with slaves and allow parodic incidents, Haphazard's attempts to escape execution, Grim the Collier who is robbed and shaved, and the dangerous comedy of prostitute, bawd and bully in The Glass of Government. All the plays distance the basic tragic experience, sometimes by presenting it early in the play and allowing the final scenes to modify its effect, sometimes by an extensive use of debate and discussion, sometimes by an insistence on the fictional nature of what is happening: Damon and Pythias not only makes much use of genre words but also presents the commonplace that "this world was like a stage" (1.397), Apilus and Virginia returns to "this Poets faining here" (1025), Octavia refuses to allow her heart to be "a stage/For ... a bloodie tragedie" (1V.i), and The Glass of Government sets the frivolity of fiction and romance ("the good king Amadis ..." p.42) against "the true discourse" (Prologue 1.14) of the moral play. Edwardes' tragicomedy of averted danger approaches Guarini's view of the form as "mixed" rather than "double": Gascoigne, however, clearly defines tragicomedy as essentially "double", with a different ending for good and bad¹⁸. Both kinds of structure were to influence the formation of Jacobean tragicomedy.

Although the four plays under discussion all seem particularly aware of their alliance with tragedy, by 1598 The Virtuous

Octavia's definition of tragicomedy as modified tragedy must have seemed anachronistic. As the period progressed tragicomedy became more clearly identified with comedy. As early as 1578 George Whetstone introduced his tragicomedy Promos and Cassandra as a "Historye" divided into two "Commical Discourses". Again in 1591 the second quarto of Lyly's Campaspe calls the play a "tragicall comedie", presumably because it ends not with a royal marriage but with Alexander giving up the woman he loves, deciding to "command himself" and thereby "command the world" (V.iv.183-5) by uniting the "two loving worms" (V.iv.156) Campaspe and Apelles. These tragical comedies with their new interest in comedy prepare the way for the tragicomedies of Marston and of Beaumont and Fletcher.

"The single assumption that makes our existence viable - that someone is watching": the audience and the Elizabethan play

Because drama is essentially public, a social as well as an aesthetic experience, drama inevitably has a special relationship with its audience. Indeed the interaction between sections of the audience, and between audience and play, is felt to be an important part of that re-creation which takes place in performance. In the letter "To the Reader" which prefaces The White Devil and which explains the failure of that play, Webster describes "a full and understanding auditory" as "the only grace and setting out of a tragedy" (ls 5-6): later ("An excellent Actor" in New and Choise Characters 1615), he sees the theatre as a circle where the audience is "the circumference", giving the play an extended existence in space, and "the Actor is the Center" (ls 4-5). A play attempts to regulate this creative interaction with its audience in several ways: one, as I have suggested, is by the definition and discussion of its

own genre which tragical comedy and tragicomedy so often provide. My subsequent chapters will suggest other ways in which this relationship is defined and controlled.

The Elizabethan play seems to have a special interest in the audience simply in its capacity as observer. Many plays present an audience on stage, some indirectly, as Andrea and Revenge watch the events of The Spanish Tragedy, some more directly. The audiences of the numerous enacted plays-within-plays provide the audience in the theatre with "some glimpse of itself" so that it is "enabled to see itself seeing" ¹⁹. An even more direct presentation of the audience is achieved in the device by which sections of the audience in the theatre seem suddenly to develop autonomous life. In Beaumont's The Knight of the Burning Pestle the Citizen and his Wife as naive observers direct our attention to the play's use of various kinds of theatrical parody and, as an image of the audience, make direct contributions to the play, offering their apprentice as an actor, commenting on play and performance, giving money to the actors, and generally laying down the law about how the play is to progress. The pair are a half-satirical, half-loving depiction of the omnipotence of the audience and of popular demand. In the public theatre the same kind of presentation of the audience was possible. Jonson's Every Man Out of His Humour from the beginning presents a complicated discussion of the relationship of author, actor and audience, as Asper acts out the ambivalent role of Macilente the envious satirist. He is observed by a fictionalised audience in the persons of Cordatus and Mitis, who comment on the scene that has just been acted or even break into the dialogue, who discuss points of dramatic construction, generic integrity, and classical example, who forestall possible criticism and distance us from the farcical events of the play by

keeping its fictional nature always before us. Mitis is introduced as a "person of no action" whom the play therefore affords "no character": we as audience are to accept him as a delegate for ourselves.

Again, many plays, especially of the private theatres, begin by establishing a relationship between author, actors and audience in the form of an Induction. Sometimes these reflect the real ambivalence of the author's attitude towards his audience. Jacke Drum's Entertainment, for instance, begins with the Tyer-man's report that the author is trying to prevent the performance, "and with violence keeps the boyes from comming on the stage" (vol 3, p.179). This is explained as a demonstration of the author's diffidence about the unworthiness of his play for its "generous" spectators, but even this gracious compliment does not quite destroy the violence of this initial gesture of the author's against both actors and audience. Again in What You Will actors playing three members of the audience "sit a good while on the stage" (Wood vol.2 p.231) before the play begins. They stress the uncertain genre-category of the play, not "Commedy, Tragedy, Pastorall, Morall, Nocturnal or Historie" and the power of the audience to make it "even What You Will" (p.233). They insult actors, author, audience and play - "a slight toye, lightly composed, to swiftly finisht, ill plotted, worse written, I fear me worst acted ..." (p.233). The three raise objections before members of the real audience can do so, and by detaching that audience from this kind of hostile criticism they prepare for a favourable reception of the play. 20.

Such devices are not peculiar to the private theatres. For performance at the Globe Webster added to Marston's The Malcontent an induction which suggests the ambivalent relationship

between audience and actors. Actors playing themselves - "W. Sly", "Sinklo", "D. Burbage, H. Condell, J. Lowin" - discuss the play and their rival theatres with an actor playing a satirical version of a member of the audience. This interest in the audience as a vital, though not always a completely approved, part of the process of re-enactment is reflected in contemporary stage conditions. The space occupied by the audience in the Elizabethan theatre was not sharply divided from the space occupied by the actors and the enacted fiction: members of the audience in public or private theatre²¹ might take their places on stage, surrounded by the play, "on the very Rushes where the Comedy is to daunce, yea and under the State of Cambyeses himself"²². The vital part played by the audience in the Elizabethan theatre is suggested, then, by the structure of the theatre itself and by the various kinds of image in the plays of the activity of the audience.

After the image of the play itself, perhaps the most frequent image for the relationship of play and audience in Elizabethan drama, and especially the mixed play, is that of the mirror. It appears in play titles - A Looking Glass for London and England, The Glass of Government - and in plays' descriptions of themselves: Virtuous and Godly Susanna excuses its mixed nature, its use of "matters grave or sad ... mixt with mirth" by the argument that the play mirrors life - "Of both of which ... you shall as in a myrrour see" (ls 19-20)²³. This image is an essentially ambiguous one. On the one hand it suggests that the audience in looking at the play is looking at itself: Gascoigne's play exhorts his audience "Content you then .../ Grave Citizens, you people greate and small/ To see yourselves in Glass of Government" (Prologue, p.6, ls 30-1). At the same time that the play uses the mirror image to implicate the audience, however, the mirror also

suggests a Brechtian detachment: the audience is not involved in the enacted experience, but is simply watching figures moving across a glass²⁴. The prologue to the first part of Marlowe's Tamburlaine, for instance, offers an ironic definition of tragedy - "View but his picture in this tragic glass/And then applaud his fortunes as you please" (ls 7-8). The mirror image alerts the audience they are not to allow themselves to become involved, but are to watch the moving "picture" and weigh up and judge the career of the aspiring hero.

However, the audience is not simply watching these reflected images from the outside: according to convention they also had power inside the play, bringing the enacted events to a fit resolution and bridging the gulf between fiction and real life as the play ends. In the epilogue to The Tempest the audience is given a place in the story, and its power is seen as similar in quality to that of the mage Prospero ("by your spell" 1.8): the "conventional appeal for applause"²⁵ becomes a discussion of power in which the power of the magician, of author, actor and director, of the audience, and of God is compared. The actor abandons his role and with it the "strength" of its fictions (1.2), and the magic land is reduced to the "bare island" of the stage (1.8): now all power belongs to the audience, to "free" the actor trapped between fiction and real life, as God's mercy "frees all faults" (1.18)²⁶. Again, the epilogue to The Changeling attributes the same final power to the audience, and this time the audience's power extends even over life and death - "Your only smiles have power to cause re-live/The dead again, or in their rooms to give/Brother a new brother, father a child ..." (Epilogue ls 5-7). As the epilogue is spoken by the bereaved husband, it seems as if the plays "corpses" are to rise to take their bows: the audience thus has power to complete the

tragedy with something like a comic passage through death to reconciliation, and with our applause and our non-tragic response of "smiles", "all griefs are reconcil'd" (1.8).

It seems particularly important to define the power of the audience and to control their responses in tragicomedy, where the conflicting demands of tragedy and comedy can create "a genuine dilemma of feeling"²⁷. Ian Fletcher, writing of Beaumont and Fletcher, suggests the special relationship which the tragicomic dramatist attempts to create with his audience:-

... the moving images on the stage are always subordinated to the effect which Beaumont and Fletcher aim to produce on the audience: it is with the audience that they are predominantly concerned.²⁸

Fletcherian tragicomedy achieves a particularly close relationship with its audience, and not only by choosing as audience a relatively narrow section of the community and by dealing with the social, moral and political issues with which this section was preoccupied²⁹. The whole relationship of audience and play seems to have changed in important ways in the first and second decades of the seventeenth century as tragicomedy became an increasingly popular and respectable form. Instead of explaining events step by step by means of direct exposition, soliloquy or choral comment, tragicomedy creates a series of conflicting responses and interpretations, constantly providing a sense of alternative possibilities. Throughout the play one is aware not only of events but of the consciousness of the author in selecting and slanting these events. Finally at the end of the play surprise achieves a new importance, the accepted interpretation of a play's action is suddenly inverted, and what has seemed to be the basic syllogism of the play is broken up. The audience, it seems, is no longer on the side of the author, sharing his omniscient understanding of the logic of character and event, but is rather on

the side of the people in the play, misunderstanding, confused and misled, until the ending of the play provides a new perspective. The audience has become a dramatic character.

Perhaps tragicomedy's special concern with the audience may be one of the reasons that the form was so well-liked. The mixed play was justified by its exponents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries above all on the grounds of its popularity: the argument of its truth to life was to wait for Dr. Johnson³⁰. Cinthio was grudgingly prepared to admit the term tragicomedy for his plays of danger averted, although he himself preferred the Aristotelian term "tragedy": he also hinted that although he himself might prefer to write tragedy of a more classically regular kind, the attitude of his audience who "frowned at the mere name of tragedy" led him to write tragicomedies instead - "after sorrows, full of joy"³¹. Even Aristotle accepted that, because of the "weakness" of the audience, the second type of tragedy, where the good survive and the wicked are punished, was the most popular³². In the introductory letter to The White Devil Webster explains that he has deviated from the classical norm "willingly, and not ignorantly" (l.15) because of the demands of his "auditory ... the uncapable multitude" (ls 16,21). In his reference to his own neglect of "all the critical laws" (l.17) Webster perhaps includes the admixture of comic and tragicomic elements which, he wishes us to believe, was necessitated by the nature of his "uncapable" audience. Later in the play Webster has Florence suggest that a "tragedy" must have "some idle mirth in't" so that it might "pass" with its audience (WD lV.i 119-20). Tragicomedy and those areas of tragedy and comedy most shaped by tragicomedy seem to have a special relationship with and a special interest in the audience, and a particular

tendency to define their own genre and their nature as fiction, and to invite the audience to look into the ambiguous mirror of dramatic illusion.

"Beginning mournfully and ending merrily": the audience and the tragicomic ending.

A play may begin, as I have suggested, with a mediating prologue, or with a scene which immediately establishes the relationship between audience, actors and author, or with a relatively flat scene of discussion and definition of the new fictional milieu, like the opening scenes of The Winter's Tale or Cymbeline. However the author often plunges his audience directly into the most concentrated and unfamiliar part of the fiction, the battlements at Elsinore, or a ship caught in a dangerous tempest. Sometimes the opening scenes of a play mirror the disorientation of the audience which has just become involved in the fiction. Twelfth Night, for instance, opens with two parallel scenes in which Orsino expresses his loss of direction in the face of unrequited love, and Viola shows her more profound disorientation in a new land, a new sense of loss, and a new personality. In some sense the opening scenes of a play have a particular density and concentration: M.M. Mahood has pointed out, for instance, that a Shakespearian play often has the greatest concentration of wordplay in its first act³³. However, although at the play's beginning the author often attempts to introduce his audience into the thick of the fictional world, the audience at the end of the play needs to be given more guidance and more time to cope with the problem of readjustment which the ending of the play provides. If the beginning of the play plunges the

audience straight into the values and action of the fiction, the play's ending needs to mediate for the audience between the world of the play and the world of real life to which they are to return.

Frank Kermode has suggested that we have a "deep need for intelligible Ends"³⁴: Webster stresses this peculiar importance of endings by his demand that "the last Act be the best in the play" (DLC 11.iii.129). Writers of fiction seem always to have found a particular difficulty with these "intelligible Ends": George Eliot wrote that "Some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation"³⁵. Kermode in reply suggests that endings are satisfactory "only when they are not negative but frankly transfigure the events in which they are immanent"³⁶. Novelists and playwrights alike have experimented with ways of evading the "negation" implicit in the fictional ending. Charlotte Brontë's Villette has an ending in which the reader is asked to decide whether to accept the hints of tragedy or of comedy³⁷. Something of the same effect is achieved in some Elizabethan two-part plays, like Marston's Antonio and Mellida and Antonio's Revenge: here in a complex system of repetition and antithesis, the tragic ending of the second part is contrasted with the comic ending of the first part, giving the effect of alternate endings to a single action.

The problem of "negation" which menaces the fictional ending is perhaps most urgent in the theatre, where at the ending of the play the audience is faced suddenly and directly with images of the return to real life, the Elizabethan jig and the modern curtain call, the epilogue where, as at the end of The Changeling, the corpses rise to confront their audience, and the audience's return from the theatre to their own homes which forms so poignant a symbol of the abandonment of fiction. The shock at the ending of a play,

which is acted out by real people in physical space and time, is inevitably greater than that at the ending of a novel, which has for its whole duration existed only on the printed page and in the mind of the reader. The disorientating effect of this shock is expressed in some seventeenth century images of the ending of the play: in Jonson's The New Inn, for example, when Lovel comes to believe, wrongly, that Lady Frampul, far from returning his love, has simply "laugh'd at all" (1V.iv 279), his disorientation is expressed in terms of the ending of a play - "how like/A court removing, or an ended play ..." (New Inn 1V.iv. 252).³⁸

The shock of the unmediated juxtaposition of fiction and real life at the end of the play may perhaps contribute to a tragic catharsis. Comedy and tragicomedy, however, often provide a buffer between fiction and the return to fact, a bridge leading the audience out of the play. Disguises are cast off, riddles and equivocations are explained: the abandonment of fiction by the people of the play prepares for the complete abandonment of fiction as the play ends. The most extreme example of this buffer in the last scene is the enacted play or masque, which is often an image of the play which includes it and an important way in which the primary play defines its own fictional nature: the ending of the one prepares the audience for the ending of the other. Paradoxically the included play or masque gives the work in which it appears a more solid existence by suggesting that since the characters of the parent play have the status of an audience in observing the included play, they partake of something of the solidity of the audience in the theatre. At the same time, the play's status as artifice is tacitly admitted: the people who watch the play are simply in a play themselves. Again, this inclusion of a play allows the audience to watch an image of

their own power as observers, and reminds us of our relationship with the play and that what we are watching is a fiction. The included play may also define, directly or by contrast, the genre of the play which includes it: the Mechanicals' "very tragical mirth" in A Midsummer Night's Dream (V.i.57) helps to exorcise the danger of tragedy which has surrounded the main plot. The included play or masque, then, may help to mediate for the audience between the world and the play by defining the play's own fictional nature and its genre, by showing what happens when a play ends, and by mirroring the activity of the audience and preparing us for the change in our status as the play ends. John Webster's plays often use the image of the play as a way of preparing for the ending of fiction, the masque in The Devil's Law-case, Flamineo's enacted death in The White Devil, the pretence and dissimulation cut through by Compass' wedding procession in A Cure for a Cuckold.

George Eliot's fear that the fictional ending should be a "negation" seems particularly relevant to tragicomedy where so often the last scene of the play unexpectedly provides new facts and a new set of definitions or reveals what we had taken as facts to be fictions. A King and No King resolves the almost tragic plot of incestuous passion not by Arbaces' moral determination not to sin, but rather by undermining the first term in the dramatic syllogism by revealing that he and Panthea are not in fact brother and sister. John Florio points out that the ending of tragicomedy is different in kind from what has gone before - "beginning mournfully and ending merrily"³⁹. Again Eric Bentley suggests that the play which ends happily inevitably exploits the divergence between the play and its ending - "Happy endings are always ironical (like everything else that is happy in comedy)" and quotes Schopenhauer's view of the

precariousness of this final affirmation - "Comedy has to hurry to lower the curtain at the moment of joy ... so that we don't see what comes afterwards"⁴⁰. This "ironical" happy ending is especially frequent in tragicomedy, where surprise throws the whole of the preceding play out of focus and holds the ending against its past. Jacobean tragicomedy is a record of different kinds of attempt to make tragicomic endings "transfigure the events in which they are immanent"⁴¹ and to use the "negation" of the ending constructively and creatively. My second and third chapters will examine the form, technique and images which tragicomedy developed in the hands of Marston and with Beaumont and Fletcher, and how these dramatists mediate between the audience and the play by coping with the "negation" of the tragicomic ending.

NOTES

1. Allardyce Nicoll, ' "Tragical-comical-historical-pastoral": Elizabethan dramatic nomenclature.' (Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 43, 1960-1, p.70).
2. By c. 1608 when Fletcher wrote the introductory letter to The Faithful Shepherdess, "tragedy" is defined simply as drama which includes death, and "comedy" as drama which is free from serious danger and which deals with "familiar people". And there was an increasing tendency to use "comical" to describe any event with a happy ending (cf The Devil's Law-case V.5.69) and "tragical" to refer to any sad spectacle, whether or not it ends in death (cf Thomas Coryat, Crudities, 1611, cit. Philip Brockbank's ed. of Volpone, 1968, p.162).
3. F.H. Ristine, English Tragicomedy: Its Origin and History (Columbia UP 1910) p.84. Greene calls both James IV and Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay histories.
4. And cf T. Lupton's All for Money, which expresses its mixed nature in the form of two paradoxes, "a Moral and Pitiful Comedie" (play-heading) and a "pleasant tragedie" (Prologue 1. 93). Even the earliest surviving moral play The Pride of Life (c.1337-46) announces its subject matter "Of mirth and eke of kare" (Prologue 1.14).
5. Hamlet 11.ii.392-6, A Midsummer Night's Dream V.i.57, 1.ii.11.
6. Aristotle, Poetics Xl11, 11-13. "Next in order comes the structure which some put first, that which has a double issue, like The Odyssey, and ends in opposite ways for the good characters and the bad ... But this is not the true tragic pleasure, but rather characteristic of comedy ..." (Trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, Loeb ed. 1927, pp. 48-9). And see M.T. Herrick,

- Tragicomedy (Urbana 1954) pp. 63-124 for a summary of the controversy in Renaissance Italy about tragicomedy and its relationship with tragedy and the tragedia di lieto fin.
7. Plautus, Amphitruo, Prologue ls 59,63. But according to Ristine (op cit., p.8) Anaxandrides and Alcaeus wrote plays called Comoedotragedia.
 8. Seneca, "Non adtingam tragicos nec togatas nostras. Habent enim hae quoque aliquid severitatis et sunt inter comoedias ac tragoedias mediae" (Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium viii.8). Trans. Robin Campbell, Letters from a Stoic (Harmondsworth 1969, p.46).
 9. Sir Philip Sidney, An Apology for Poetry (1595). E.D. Jones, English Critical Essays XV1 Century to XV111 Century (1922 p.46).
 10. John Florio, Florios Second Frutes (1591) p.23. Cited by Herrick, op. cit., pp. 215-16. Florio seems to have been interested in tragicomedy: A World of Words (1598) defines the genre as "beginning mournfully and ending merrily, half a tragedy and half a comedy." Another Italian criticism of the mixed nature of sixteenth century English theatre is found in Marston's satirical morality play Histriomastix (c.1599). Here the Italian lord Landulpho condemns the "lame stuffe" of the players (H.H. Wood 1939 vol 111 p.265) - "Most ugly lines and base browne-paper stuffe/Thus to abuse our heavenly poesie" (p.264). This is contrasted with an idealised view of Italian drama - "As if a Synod of the holly Gods/Came to tryumph within our Theaters" (p.266). This criticism is allowed some force, but characteristically Marston partially disables the judgement of the critic as Landulpho is described as "an Asse" (p.267).
 11. Ristine; op. cit., p.64. And cf Guarini, The Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry (1599) A.H. Gilbert, Literary Criticism from Plato to Dryden 1940) - "Tragicomedy can be connected in no way

with tragedy" (p.522), it uses "above all the comic order" (p.511).

12. Guarini, "What need have we today to purge pity and terror with tragic sights, since we have the precepts of our most holy religion, which teaches us the word of the gospel? Hence these horrible and savage spectacles are superfluous, nor does it seem to me that today we should introduce a tragic action for any other reason than to get delight from it." (p.523).
13. Madeleine Doran, Endeavors of Art (Madison 1954) p.193.
14. References to Gascoigne are from Works, ed. Cunliffe, vol 2 (Cambridge 1910).
15. If more of the works of Richard Edwardes survived, he might appear a key figure in the development of the kind of tragic-comedy Fletcher was to use. As well as Damon and Pythias, Edwardes also wrote Palamon and Arcite, a tragic-comedy based on The Knight's Tale - see W.Y. Durand, "Notes on Richard Edwardes" JGP 4, 1902) pp. 348-69.
16. In the Prologue ls 14-15 Edwardes suggests that "In Commedies the greatest Skylle is this, rightly to touche/All thynges to the quicke ...", the same technique which the author himself used "in Commedies" - although here Edwardes seems to contrast previous plays of his - "Commedies" - with his present "tragicall comedy".
17. See W.A. Armstrong, "Damon and Pythias and Renaissance theories of tragedy" (English Studies 39, 1958) pp. 200-207. Aristippus also describes Carisophus' hypocrisy, his ability to construct "a Legend of Lies/which he wyll avouch with such tragicall cryes ..." (ls 127-8). Again Durand (op. cit., pp. 349-50) cites a marginal note of 1564 in the document State Paper Dept,

Public Records Office, vol xxxvi no 22 which refers to Edward(es) tragedy" which Durand takes to refer to Damon and Pythias.

18. Guarini, op. cit. Gilbert, p.507.
19. Lionel Abel, Metatheatre (NY 1963) - on the subject of Cervantes' The Marvellous Pageant (p.130).
20. For an interesting article on the relationship of audience and play in the theatres of the children's troupes see Michael Shapiro, "Audience vs. Dramatist in Jonson's Epicoene and other Plays of the Children's Troupes". (English Literary Renaissance 3. 1973 pp. 400-417).
21. Thomas Dekker, The Guls Horne-booke (1609) Ch. vi. Cit E.K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage (Oxford 1923 vol 4 p.366) - "Whether therefore the gatherers of the publique or priuate Playhouse stand to receive the afternoones rent, let our Gallant ... presently aduance himself up to the Throne of the stage".
22. Dekker, op. cit.
23. And of Bale's Kynge Johan which is described as "a mirror" (The Interpreter after Act 1). Puttenham's The Arte of English Poesie (1589 l.19) describes the "delectation" of watching plays, which is "to behold as it were in a glass that lively image of our dead forefathers". The image, however, is not restricted to exemplary discussion or the moral interlude. Hamlet describes "the purpose of playing" as "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature" (111.ii.20-22). In the deposition scene of Richard 11 part of the power springs from the use of suppressed play-images, "a mockery king" (1V.i.260), "the shadow of your sorrow ... the shadow of your face" (292-3), and especially the "looking-glass" (268) with its "brittle

glory" (287). Again the Induction to Every Man Out of His Humour suggests that the play will "oppose a mirrour" to the eyes of the audience "As large as is the stage, whereon we act:/Where they shall see the times deformitie ..."

(Induction 118-20).

24. This double meaning is also suggested by the use of the mirror image for an exemplum, as in The Mirror for Magistrates, which implies a similar balance between detachment and involvement.
25. Frank Kermode, Arden ed. of The Tempest (1954) p.133, note on epilogue.
26. The same attribution of power and even the same kind of language occurs in Wellborn's epilogue to A New Way to Pay Old Debts:-

Nothing wants then

But your allowance - and in that our all
Is comprehended; it being known, nor we,
Nor he that wrote the comedy, can be free,
Without your manumission

(Arthur Symons, Mermaid ed 1887, vol 1, p.202).

27. J.R. Mulryne, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedy" (John Webster, Mermaid Critical Commentaries, Brian Morris ed, 1970) p.135.
28. Ian Fletcher, Beaumont and Fletcher (1967) p.49.
29. For Beaumont and Fletcher's social and political context see, e.g. John Danby, "Beaumont and Fletcher, Jacobean Absolutists" (Poets on Fortune's Hill 1952) pp. 152-183.
30. In the preface to his 1765 edition of Shakespeare, Johnson came close to seeing Shakespeare's plays as tragicomic in essence - he describes the plays as "not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind: exhibiting the real state of translunary nature,

which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow" (W.K.

Wimsatt, Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare, Harmondsworth 1969) p.62.

31. Cinthio's prologue to Altile, cited by Ristine, op. cit., p.29. Ristine quotes a similar attitude in other writers of tragi-comedy, notably Lope de Vega (p.49) and Ricardo del Turia (p.51). The prologue to Amphitruo, too, hints that tragedy is unpopular ("Are you disappointed/To find it's a tragedy?" ls 50-1) and that the play with the happy ending was better liked.
32. Aristotle, Poetics xiii ll-13. Fyfe, op. cit., translates ἀσθενησάν (weakness) as "sentimentality" - "It is the sentimentality of the audience which makes this seem the best form: for the poets follow the wish of the spectators. But this is not the true tragic pleasure but rather characteristic of comedy ..."
33. M.M. Mahood, Shakespeare's Wordplay (1957) p.166.
34. Frank Kermode, The Sense of An Ending (1966) p.8.
35. Cited by Frank Kermode in The Sense of an Ending (1966) p.174.
36. Kermode, op. cit., p.175.
37. Vilette - "Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart: leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again out of great terror ..." (Haworth edition Vol lll 1905 p.593). And compare John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969) which also provides an alternative ending.
38. As Anne Barton has pointed out to me this is a close echo of John Donne's "The Calme" ls. 13-14:

And all our beauty and our trimme decayes
Like courts removing, or like ended playes.

39. John Florio A World of Words (op. cit.).
40. Eric Bentley The Life of the Drama pp. 301, 334.
41. Frank Kermode The Sense of an Ending (1966) p.175.

CHAPTER TWO

"I laugh to see thee crie": the divided response and the development of tragicomedy in Marston and in Beaumont and Fletcher.

"Seriously fantastical": Marston's experiments in the mixture of genres.

In the middle of the first act of Jacke Drums Entertainment, when the gallants have been introduced, the basic antithesis between the wanton and the virtuous daughter has been established, and both tragedy and comedy have been suggested by the figures of the sinister usurer Mamon and the grotesque sensualist John fo de King, two unnamed pages suddenly enter, "the one laughing, the other crying" (Wood vol lll, p.91):

Page 1 Why do'st thou crie?
 Page 2 Why do'st thou laugh?
 Page 1 I laugh to see thee crie.
 Page 2 And I crie to see thee laugh.

This tiny scene is included specifically for the purpose of defining the mixed nature of the play and the divided response from the audience which the play expects: laughter and tears exist side by side, alternate reactions to the world of the play. The play is to include attempts at murder and mutilation, grotesque violence and madness temporary and permanent, but these scenes of danger and cruelty are undermined by songs, by the pervasive spirit of burlesque for which the child actors were presumably peculiarly equipped¹, by the elaborate comic plots of seduction foiled and of actual cuckoldry, and perhaps by satirical implications even in the name of the romantic hero². Again, Sir Edward Fortune's cheerful response to the disappearance of his daughter ("Let's sing, drink, sleep, for thats

the best relieve" p.206) forms a parody of the divided response of the audience, and directs us to "laugh" at the unlikely misfortunes of the lovers.

Marston's poems and plays are full of this kind of explicit statement of divided intention. His earliest known work, The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image, is presented initially as an erotic poem - "My wanton Muse lasciviously doth sing/Of sportive love ..." (To his Mistress" ls 1-2). This erotic element, however, is repeatedly undercut. In "The Authour in prayse of his precedent poem" he ironically congratulates himself on his workmanship - "Are not my lines/Right in the swaggering humor of these times?" (ls 1-2). Later he repeats more explicitly his claim that the purpose behind the poem was an ironic one, insisting that he could not have written it "in sad seriousness", but that it was rather an oblique denunciation of the ridiculousness and immorality of contemporary erotic verse, "such nastie stuffe .../Such maggot-tainted lewd corruption" (The Scourge of Villainy Satire VI ls 6-8). It is characteristic of Marston to take advantage of a convention and at the same time to burlesque and undermine it: Pigmalion is an erotic poem, but at the same time its ludicrous blend of coyness and explicitness, and its exploration of the shadow-land between sexual fantasy and sexual fact, lends support to Marston's claim to have written an expose of the Ovidean love poem³.

Throughout his early poems Marston insists on his own divided interest and the divided response he expects from his audience. In his second collection of satirical poems The Scourge of Villainy, satire itself is seen as a mixed form springing from mixed impulses, written "in serious iest, and iesting seriousness" (Proemium in librum tertium l. 1), the product both of "rage" and of

"sporting merriment" (Satire XI, 239-40). Marston's ambivalences, though, are wider than his definitions of genre: he distrusts the satiric impulse itself, the violent figure of the satirist, "frantique, foolish, bedlam mad" (Satire X, l. 10), and he is tormented by the suspicion that his work is worthless - "I prostitute my Muse ..." (In lectores prorsus indignos l. 61). This profound sense of uncertainty, the apprehension of mixed emotions and mixed genres in his poems, is an important impulse in his satirical writing.

The ubiquitous sense of uncertainty in the satires helps to create the world of the poems, a world of sin and crime where all values, moral and aesthetic, are elusive. It also helps to direct the relationship of reader to poem. On the simplest level the reader's criticisms are forestalled by Marston's own tentativeness, and he is forced to accept Marston's integrity and the power of his vision of evil. The framework of irony in the poems too helps to control the uneasy relationship of reader and poem. John Scott Colley, for instance, has pointed out that in Pigmalion the poem subtly turns on the reader:

Pigmalion is deluded by a vain, empty imitation of a woman. The reader, in turn, is deluded by a vain, empty poetic imitation of the true experience of love-making. Just those problems which engage Marston's protagonist engage his readers also. The reader of the poem is as much a part of the satiric drama as are the characters within the poem.⁴

In satirical writing it is particularly necessary that a sense of community should be established between author and reader so that the two can unite and judge the fallen world. In his satires Marston engages the reader by giving as he goes along his definitions of satire and its function, by breaking off to praise or condemn a particular passage, idea or word, by repeating or commenting on

particularly successful lines⁵. He adds ironic dedications, "To the World's Mightie Monarch, Good Opinion", "To his most esteemed, and best beloved Selfe", "To everlasting Oblivion", "To Detraction"⁶. Confidence and doubt, praise and insults of his audience, face each other across the poems, and the reader is kept continually aware of his direct relationship with the poet, and of the process of making and of reading poetry. The satirical poems have a continual sense of alternate possibilities: the poet is unwilling to impose a falsifying order on the rich chaos of experience, unwilling to sacrifice either the "seriousness" or the "jesting" which shaped his writing. Rather than providing poems easily reducible to a simple moral abstract, Marston rather tries to involve his audience in a peculiarly intimate sense in the complexity of moral life in a fallen world.

When in about 1599 Marston turned to the stage he brought with him what he had learned from the verse satires. The plays use character-types and subject-matter from the poems⁷, but perhaps more important the plays elaborate on the poems' statements of divided response and on their critical interest in their audience. In his descriptions of his plays Marston repeatedly stresses their mixed nature. He most often uses the genre-word "Commedie", but he often seems to use it simply as a general term for dramatic representation⁸. Jacke Drums Entertainment is introduced as a "Comedie" (Wood vol 111 p.179), in The Malcontent the letter "To the Reader" introduces "this comedy" (1.27), and even the induction to Antonio and Mellida prepares for "this comedy" (1.135)⁹. However, Marston very often refuses to apply to his plays the conventional distinctions of tragedy and comedy: What You Will is neither "Commedy, Tragedy, Pastoral, Morall, Nocturnal or Historie ... but even What You Will" (Wood vol 11, p.233). Again the prologue

to The Dutch Courtesan repeatedly calls itself simply a "Play" - "this easie Play" (1.1), "our play" (1.12), "the full scope of the play" (fabulae Argumentum), and introduces a pun on the play's subject-matter, "passionate man in his slight play" (1.16). Marston the playwright for the select audiences of the children's theatre on the whole rejects the traditional genre-distinctions of the public playhouse and attempts to formulate new generic terms, neutral or explicitly mixed. Jacke Drum is an "Entertainment", Antonio and Mellida defines his aim in the play, "to affect ... to be seriously fantastical" (Dedication 1.6). This synthesis of the "seriously fantastical" runs throughout Marston's work, reaching its most explicit expression in The Malcontent, which is described in the dedicatory epistle as a "comedy", in Webster's induction as "a bitter play ... neither satire nor moral, but the mean passage of a history" (ls 42-44), and in the Stationers' Register for 1604 as a "Tragicomedia".

Despite Marston's unwillingness to commit his plays to any precise or traditional form of genre-classification, his whole dramatic career is a series of attempts to create and define mixed genres, neither tragedy nor comedy, "neither satire nor moral", which would mirror his "serious-fantastical view of (the) world"¹⁰. All of Marston's plays have a divided allegiance¹¹: although formally they are unlike the Fletcherian version of the tragicomic synthesis they do approach the "genuine dilemma of feeling"¹² characteristic of tragicomedy. With the exception of The Malcontent, which I shall discuss in detail in chapter three, Marston's most interesting and successful experiments in a "seriously fantastical" tragicomic mode are perhaps the two parts of Antonio and Mellida, and The Dutch Courtesan.

Tragicomic discords: Antonio and Mellida and The Dutch Courtesan

Tragicomedy seems to express itself not in a simple linear movement but in a series of antitheses, "discords" in which comedy confronts tragedy, and fact and fiction, appearance and reality, past and present, are closely juxtaposed. In the two parts of the "seriously fantastical" Antonio and Mellida this kind of antithesis is a particularly important part of the effect. The two plays are unique in Elizabethan drama, two plays of different kinds included in the same unit. Antonio and Mellida is "this love's comedy" (V.i.66), a kind of comedy of humours disturbed by some of the interests of revenge tragedy, the "tragic spectacle" (V.ii.173): Antonio's Revenge is a revenge tragedy disturbed by some of the interests of the comedy of humours. The first play especially makes a series of conflicting genre-definitions. It is "this comedy" (Induction 1.135), "the comic crosses of true love" (V.ii.264), "this love's comedy" (V.i.66), but at the same time it suggests the possibilities of a tragic ending, with the "tragic spectacle" (V.ii.173) of the coffins, or the "tragedy" of Antonio (V.ii.215). In the midst of these clashing definitions, too, the play includes one of the central images of tragicomedy, as the apparently dead Antonio rises from his coffin¹³. Antonio's Revenge makes less ambiguous genre-claims: it is "Tragoedia Cothurnata" (11.ii.220), "some black tragedy" (V.iii.180), where the audience's reaction is to be "tears" rather than applause (V.iii.186). Even here, however, the tragic potential is disturbed by its curious combination of understatement and overstatement, and by the participation of the fool "Sir" Jeffrey Balurdo in the murder of Piero. The two plays create antitheses of genre not only between the two but within the separate units. They provide an unprecedented attempt to suggest

alternate endings to a given situation, to define the real untidiness of experience through clashing genre-definitions. Although quite different from Fletcher's version of the tragicomic synthesis the plays with their awareness of their mixed nature and their use of antithesis and the "genuine dilemma of feeling", approach a personal definition of tragicomedy, a form based, like Tudor tragical comedy, on qualified tragedy.

The Antonio plays exercise to the full Marston's aptitude for parody. The spirit of the plays is a vision of revenge tragedy, half serious and half parodic: as in Pigmalion Marston obtains an ambiguous effect by simultaneously using the convention and ridiculing it. Antonio, disguised as a fool, parodies the mad Hamlet, the surprisingly solid ghost of Andrugio parodies the ghost of Hamlet's father. Brutus wishes he could destroy the spirit of Caesar without harming the man: Antonio desires to destroy Piero's part in his son without harming the boy who loves him¹⁴. The plays unite to undermine some of the basic ingredients of revenge tragedy: in a burlesque of tragic irony Mellida reunited with her lover at the end of Antonio and Mellida speaks the dying words of Dido (V.ii.224), and Antonio's repeated falling to the ground could hardly appear other than a travesty of the sufferings of the tragic hero. The two plays consistently employ the double vision which is established by the induction of Antonio and Mellida, where the actors admit their own ambiguous nature, children playing adult roles in a play with tragic and comic possibilities. The awareness of the play's fictional nature and the mechanism of acting and audience behind it, as well as the ambiguous definition of genre, preserves a tragicomic double vision through the plays¹⁵.

The Antonio plays, then, approach an individualistic

definition of tragicomedy in their tentative statement of any of the tragic absolutes, their determined double vision of fictional persona and child actor, and in their structural use of antithesis and repetition between the two parts and within each unit. The Dutch Courtesan, although it defines itself as a "Commedy" or simply as a "play" (Prologue ls 1,12), approaches more closely the Fletcherian tragicomic structure, which wants deaths, but brings some near it.

In The Dutch Courtesan the series of "discords" functions in part, like the later A Cure for a Cuckold, through the double plot structure. Cocledemoy's gulling of the hypocritical Puritan Mulligrub is a distorting mirror of the worldly wise Freevill's educative manipulation of the man "of a professed abstinence" (1.ii. 109-10) Malheureux. The shaving of Mulligrub and Cocledemoy's courting of his wife in the presence of her doomed husband provide a grotesque parallel of Malheureux's sense of the physical and moral degradation of his infatuation with the Courtesan. Both men are brought to the foot of the gallows before being dismissed, sadder and wiser men, but even the scene at the scaffold is disturbed by Cocledemoy's comic antics as he picks Malheureux's pocket and woos Mrs. Mulligrub. The convincing pain and passion of Malheureux have an occasional almost tragic intensity, but both are undermined by the precise comparison made with the grasping and vindictive Mulligrub. The play operates as a tissue of opposites, as the two plots cast ironic light on each other and as Cocledemoy and Freevill, Mulligrub and Malheureux, the willful whore Franceschina and the light-minded Mrs. Mulligrub, are compared and contrasted. Even within the separate plots important contrasts are made and developed, as Franceschina is contrasted with the idealised woman Beatrice, and the candid, strong-minded and chaste Crispinella.

By means of this network of antithesis any tragic possibilities are undermined and complexities cluster around any apparently simple comic statement. The tragic possibilities inherent in the predicament of Malheureux are distanced and controlled by the implied comparison with the ridiculous sufferings of Mulligrub, but also by the more direct commentary of Freevill on the ironic divergence of Malheureux's professed abstinence and his uncontrollable desire. Ironic repetition of words and incidents is a particularly important part of the tragicomic effect. As Freevill prepares to visit the Courtesan, Malheureux ends the scene tidily with a moral couplet - "Well, I'll go to make her loath the shame she's in. /The sight of vice augments the hate of sin" (l.i. 152-3), which Freevill punctures - "The sight of vice augments the hate of sin! /Very fine, perdy!" (l. i 1154-5). Later when Malheureux falls in love with Franceschina, Freevill again ironically repeats Malheureux's expressions of pain or attempts to rationalise his passion - "Oh, that to love should be or shame or sin!" (l.ii.154). Moreover, Freevill directly controls our response to the event, distancing the sense of pain, and interpreting it simply as cause for "Laughter eternal!" (l.ii.137).

The tragicomic form of The Dutch Courtesan, the avoidance of death, its use of antithesis and ironic repetition, commentary and double vision, its ambiguous use of laughter as an expression of pain, seems in a sense to be an image of the moral uncertainty and tentativeness which the play so clearly expresses, an uncertainty which a simpler tragic or comic form might have falsified. Malheureux's leading impulse, "a modest diffidence and self-mistrust" (Prologue l.18) seems to mirror Marston's own. The play is profoundly dubious about any prefabricated moral system,

and Malheureux's initial complacent moralising is undermined by the play's distrust of either of his extreme positions as ascetic and sensualist, by the ironic defences of the whore and the bawd (1.i.92-126, 1.ii.29-54) and especially by the use of "Nature" as the final judge of behaviour¹⁶. Malheureux's education begins with the recognition that "virtue" might be "unnatural" to fallen man (11.i.80-1) and that the natural appetite is less sinful than calculated injury, "sin of cold blood, mischief with wak'd eyes" (11.ii.221). Even Freevill, who at times seems to represent praiseworthy moderation, admits that his educative gulling of Malheureux is not undertaken out of pure virtue (1V.ii.39)¹⁷, and suggests that imperfect man in his imperfect society has no contact with pure virtue - "Nothing extremely best with us endures/No use in simple purities; the elements/Are mix'd for use." (1V.ii.40-2). The play sets out to define the "wise man": it begins by suggesting that it is harder to find a wise man than to recover Mulligrub's stolen goods (1.i.8), and ends with the "wise man" Malheureux abandoning altogether the criterion of wisdom, and accepting that "he that 'gainst Nature would seem wise" (1.ii.161) is the worst sort of fool. This concern for wisdom percolates down to the subplot, where Cocledemoy ironically praises the "virtue and wisdom" (1V.v.83) of the imprisoned Mulligrub. Finally Cocledemoy insists that he had acted only "euphoniae gratia - for wit's sake" (V.iii.125). The search for wisdom is abandoned and wit is accepted instead: it is the nearest that the fallen world of the play can approach to wisdom.

The Dutch Courtesan has a mature tolerance for human frailty, a respect for the natural impulse very different from the "neurotic and unhealthy obsession with sex"¹⁸ of which Marston is

still sometimes accused. Its mixture of the genres presents the danger of death but not death itself, and provides comic or satiric disruption of potentially tragic scenes in ironic repetition or commentary and in the ambiguous treatment of laughter. The play approaches the form of tragicomedy in its use of antithesis, contrast, and ironic juxtaposition. It seems the tragicomic form, itself a tentative one, is the most suitable structure for the expression of a tentative natural morality. In most of his work, and especially in The Malcontent, the Antonio plays and The Dutch Courtesan, John Marston experimented with different ways of mixing comedy and tragedy, burlesque, romance and satire, in an attempt to formulate new definitions of the genres which would be particularly relevant to the children's theatres, a new kind of tragicomedy which would be capable of synthesising very different experiences and attitudes to experience, would provide a clear expression of mixed feelings, and would succeed in regulating the delicate relationship between the audience and his play.

"This generous presence": the relationship of audience and play in Marston's tragicomedies.

In Marston's poems, I have suggested, the reader is involved in a particularly intimate way in the satire. Marston places himself firmly at the centre of the scene, providing a detailed discussion of the satirist's craft, dedicating his work to himself, insulting his readers and hinting that they are guilty of the kinds of errors against which he is writing. The plays retain this critical interest in audience and reader, as play after play defines the relation of audience and fiction by induction, prologue,

dedication or introductory letter. The introduction to The Fawne, for instance, draws the distinction between reader and audience, between the play read and the play seen. Marston insists that although tragedy could "abide the most curious perusal", this was not so of comedy - "Comedies are writ to be spoken, not read ... the life of these things consists in action" ("To my Equal Reader", ls 68-9, 65-7). The plays are made, then, so as to relate particularly to the audience in the theatre, and to achieve this they define and discuss the place of the audience in the process of enactment, the power and responsibility of the playwright and the divergence of actor and his role, and they present the audience with images of themselves, of the author, and of the play.

As far as we know, all Marston's plays were initially written for the children's theatres - indeed before Shakespeare's romances and A King and No King tragicomedy seems to belong quite specifically to the private theatres. The relationship of audience to playwright and play in the children's theatres seems rather different from that in the adult companies. In a sense, the relationship of audience and play is more direct in the children's theatre, where the personality of the actor and the discussion of the actor's role is relatively unimportant, and the two interlocking creative forces behind the action are felt to be the audience and the playwright. Michael Shapiro has pointed out ways in which the audience is involved in the plays, ways in which possible mockery from the audience is built into the work and in which "dramatists writing for the children's troupes tried with the plays themselves to neutralise their [ie the audience's] counterperformances."¹⁹ Marston's treatment of reader and audience throughout his creative life, however, is more complicated than the simple forestalling of criticism by offering "the audience a flattering image of

itself"²⁰: the audience is intimately involved in the criticism of plays and satires, and is reflected in the works themselves.

Many of Marston's plays begin with an attempt to define the nature of the audience and their relationship with play and playwright. Of Marston's ten plays, four open with an elaborate induction, and most of the others provide some kind of discussion of the play's fictional nature and the audience's role in prologue, dumb show or pageant. In the induction to What You Will, as in Webster's induction to The Malcontent, the audience is provided with a frame of reference within the theatre by the appearance of a semi-satiric version of itself²¹. In the induction to Antonio and Mellida the child actors discuss and even parody the parts they are to play, understating the reality of the play by recognising the stock nature of the characters, theatrical exigencies like the need for doubling, and their own incapacity for romantic and tragic roles, and the actors direct the audience's attention by guessing at their reactions. The inductions, then, set the plays firmly in the theatre, and frankly admit the fictional nature of what is about to be performed. They reflect the audience and the world of the audience which the play is to leave temporarily for the court of Venice or Ferrara, and to which it will return as the play ends. Like his great rival Ben Jonson, Marston uses induction and epilogue deliberately to interpret the relationship of author and actors to audience, and to examine the role of satire and the nature of its practitioners. In almost every case, too, Marston finds answers different from Jonson's: his prologues, epilogues and inductions stress again and again his own tentativeness - "The best best seal of wit is wit's distrust" (What You Will, Wood vol. 11, p.233) - and the dubiousness of the

satiric standpoint, and although he recognises the tension between them, he submits to the judgement of the audience, attacking those so confident as to declare their independence of the audience's applause²².

The beginnings of Marston's plays, then, are surrounded by an array of prefatory material, defining the genre of the enacted fiction, reminding the audience of its clearly fictional nature, defining the role of actors, playwright and audience, and repeating his tentativeness about his plays. Within the play itself the complex relationship of audience and play is perhaps most clearly regulated by the ambivalence of Marston's satiric commentators. The induction to What You Will contains a condemnation of the moral stance of the satirist. Even in the verse satires the figure of Kinsayder is an ambivalent one, but in the plays condemnation of the complacent critic is even more obvious. In Jacke Drum, for instance, Brabant Signor the would-be satirist, the self-conceited "Censurer" led by "Arrogance/And glorious ostentation of thy wit" (Wood vol III, p.240) gets himself cuckolded in his attempt to render ridiculous the lecherous Frenchman John fo de King, and he is contrasted with the sensible gallant Planet. Again in What You Will the ridiculous discontented academic satirist Lampatho Doria is set against the courtier and epicure Quadratus, in each case to the discomfort of the more extreme satirical spokesman and the victory of the moderate view. The two satirists may to some extent represent Jonson and the Jonsonian view in the War of the Theatres, but at the same time Marston detaches himself from a part of his own personality and his past; Lampatho Doria the "arrogant, od, impudent" (Wood vol II p.250) satirist is even attacked as "Don Kinsayder", Marston's own pseudonym (p.248). The complexity in

treatment of satirist and humourist is exaggerated by reservations even about the viewpoint of the man who apparently stands for sanity and moderation. In What You Will, for example, the "libertine" (p.248) Quadratus represents a principle of enjoyment and "natural" behaviour which fits Marston's comic spirit. Nonetheless, Marston is not blind to Quadratus' failings. The play is about the problem of living in a corrupt world; Quadratus who makes the most of it is seen as a more mature character than the envious Lampatho Doria. Nevertheless, Iacomo's pointed remark that Cato at least was "valiant and honest, which an epicure nere was ..." (p.291) expresses a real ambivalence about his character. Marston's ambiguous view of his own dramatic function in his satirical tragicomedies directs the audience, stresses their importance in the process of enactment, and adds complexity to the comic form of some of the plays.

Marston directs his audience's response to the play, then, by elaborate prologues and inductions, by mixed and tentative definitions of genre, and by his ambiguous view of his own satiric function. The audience must be ready to make constant readjustments, but because of Marston's careful directing the effect is never merely confused. However, the reach of the plays is deliberately limited; there is little appeal beyond the framework of the play itself, and hardly a scene goes by when we are not made aware of the limits of the fiction. In an important sense Marston's plays are about the process of making, acting in, and watching plays.

To a greater degree perhaps than in most of the plays of the public theatre, Marston directs his discussion of the audience's role to the beginning of his plays. Towards the end of the plays he

uses some of the familiar images of ending from the popular theatre, like the masque or the play within the play, but often the fictional aspect of the included play is relatively unimportant and its preparation for the ending of the parent play is brief and sketchy. There is often little sense of the included play as an independent fiction, and more of it as a means of defining indirectly the play which includes it. Histrionastix, The Malcontent and What You Will all include full-scale entertainments or discussions of them, but in none of them does the included play have a coherent plot and a full discussion of the roles of actor, author and audience. In Histrionastix, for instance, the enacted play is a brief and plotless hotch-potch of romantic tragedy and prodigal-son morality, which frames a discussion of the weakness of the audience-actor relationship in the plays of the public theatres and which defines in parodic terms the mixed nature of Marston's play as Posthast grotesquely muddles genre-terms - "Mother Gurtons neadle (a Tragedy);/The Divell and Dives (a Comedie)..." (Wood vol lll p.265). In Antonio and Mellida the play within the play has been lifted from within the fictional framework to surround the major play itself, and to define the relationship of audience and play before the play proper begins. Finally in What You Will the primary play is defined by contrast with two plays which are to be presented before the Duke of Venice. The play, like the hedonistic duke, rejects the "morall play", the "Comedy, intituled Temperance" (Wood vol ll, p.290), and also the "tragicke solid passion" of the death of Cato (p.291). The play refuses to be either a morality or a tragedy, but instead gives a "happy, commicall" (p.293) ending to the highly-charged plot of mistaken identities.

Marston, then, uses the play within the play, but on the

whole the interests of the included play tend to be dealt with more directly in the parent play itself. Again, with the possible exception of the rejected paradigms in What You Will, the included play is not particularly important as an image of ending.

Marston's consistent use of dramatic parody and burlesque, and his use of the image of the play, suggests that he is particularly interested in his audience simply in their capacity as observers, as a body of people who have watched other plays and who are interested in their own role in the process of enactment, and in having this defined by the presentation on stage of people who mirror the activity of the audience, like Landulpho and the gentlemen in Histrionastix, or the court in What You Will. As well as the play as an image of ending and a method of relating audience and play, however, Marston uses a particular image in a unique and critical way: the image of the word.

"This Babel pride": linguistic disturbance in Marston's tragicomedies.

An important way in which the dramatist can draw the attention of his audience to the play as artefact is by describing the nature and function of language. Shakespeare in Love's Labours Lost and Jonson in The Poetaster are explicitly interested in kinds of language and the point where language fails: this interest is used not only to judge a society where language has taken on an artificial independent life, but also to describe the play's own nature as a linguistic construct, to invite the audience to view the play critically and objectively, and to mediate for the audience between the real world and the world of the play, a fictional

world built with action and language. In Marston's plays highly-charged emotional language is almost always undercut and ridiculed, especially by the use of play images. Malevole urges the despairing Pietro "do not rand, do not turn player" (Malc IV.iv.5):

Quadratus mocks the lovesick Iacomo - "He speaks like a player, hah! poeticall!" (Wood vol 11, p.238).

Samuel Schoenbaum has accused Marston's work of being "inarticulate ... incoherent ... hysterical"²³: It seems to me that he is rather a writer who is critically interested in the inarticulate and the incoherent as being other ways in which men prove themselves inadequate for the roles they are called upon to play, a linguistic parallel for Malheureux's inability to live up to his own strict moral code. In play after play, Marston sees the breakdown of language as a symptom of the breakdown of society. In its most comical aspect, in What You Will Albano's stutter at moments of stress, and Francisco's mimicking of it, the failure of language provides a ludicrous example of man's inability to live up to his own image of nobility. Franceschina's or John fo de King's broken English, Piero's stutter, Antonio or Balurdo's inability to finish similes, Granuffo's silence, all suggest not only that men are essentially incoherent, but that words, the very medium of the plays, are untrustworthy.

"Babel" is one of Marston's favourite images for the tragicomic undermining of language which shapes the world of his plays. The Malcontent opens with "the vilest out-of-tune music being heard", (l.i. initial SD) the sign that the play is "building Babylon" (1.1,2)²⁴, presenting a court where sin rules and where language appears distorted into grotesque and extreme forms²⁵.

Malevole/Altofront controls the relationship between his two

personae by using two different kinds of language: to move from one personality to another he "shifteth his speech" (l.iv.43SD).

Antonio and Mellida especially is critically interested in the point where language fails, and the failure of language undermines some of the play's most apparently tragic moments. G.K. Hunter has pointed out that

Marston's fondness for aposiopesis (sudden breaks in speech) can be seen as part of the ... effort to render the real and (in his view) significant incoherence of speech. He sees passion as leading not to action but to inaction, not only to eloquence but also to inarticulateness...²⁶

Speeches are repeatedly broken off, sentences left unfinished, as characters search for a suitable simile. The fool Balurdo regularly leaves his metaphors uncompleted - "now would I be that toy, to put you in the head kindly to conceit my-my-my-pray you give m'an epithet for love" (l.i. 220-2). However this sense of the failure of language under pressure is not confined to the more narrowly comic characters. Feliche accuses Piero of "this Babel pride" (l.i.58), an accusation which the tyrant proves by answering with a Senecan tag (l.i.59): later Piero is reduced to complete inarticulateness by the disappearance of Mellida - "I know not who-who-who-what I do-do-do-nor who-who-who-where I am..." (l.iii. 175-7). This sense of the inadequacy of language also suggests important reservations about Antonio and his relationship with Mellida, and undermines his tragic potential. Antonio breaks off, leaving a sentence unfinished, to take part in an Italian love-duet with Mellida: the page who listens suspects that "confusion of Babel is fall'n upon these lovers" (lV.i.219)²⁷. Elsewhere language fails Antonio - "she comes like - O no simile/Is precious choice enough/To illustrate her descent" (l.i.151-3), "And thou

and I will live -/Let's think like what - and thou and I will live/
 Like unmatched mirrors of calamity" (11.i.295-7). At the end of
 the two plays, in a final denial of language the murderers pluck
 out Piero's tongue - "We'll spoil your oratory" (Antonio's
 Revenge V.iii.64).

In this treatment of language the Antonio plays look like
 a precise parody, or perhaps rather a continuation, of The Spanish
 Tragedy. In Kyd's play Hieronymo's sense of injustice and of the
 failure of normal rhetoric leads him to make lengthy speeches of
 Senecan pastiche (ST 11.v.67-80), like Piero's or Antonio's
 romantic Italian. Hieronymo's play is to be "Tragoedia Cothurnata"
 (ST 1V.i.160), like Antonio's Revenge, and is to be acted "in
 unknown languages" (ST 1V.i.173): Hieronymo rejoices that through
 this display of linguistic confusion he will bring about "the fall
 of Babylon" (ST 1V.i.195). In this world where substance has been
 replaced by appearances, and where "what to speak" (ST 1V.i.103) is
 less important than "how to speak" (1V.i.105), Hieronymo finally
 abandons language altogether by biting out his tongue²⁸. In the
 same way the Antonio plays show an increasing distrust of language,
 though here the inadequacy of man for language, and of language for
 man, is treated as a comic as well as a tragic dilemma.

Marston, tragicomedy and the audience: conclusions.

Almost all of Marston's plays approach tragicomedy in their
 conflicting, or neutral, genre definitions, in their investigation
 of the "genuine dilemma of feeling", and in their interruption of
 simple comic or tragic moments by contrasting impulses. In plays
 and poems, Marston shows a special interest in audience and reader,

in the difference between reading and seeing, and of the ways in which, directly and indirectly, the audience can be involved in the process of enactment. Marston takes care to provide a commentary on his plays by defining their mixed nature and by suggesting the importance and the inadequacy of the verbal medium. The dramatist mediates for the audience between the world and the play by some of the conventional images, the included play or masque for example, but also peculiarly directly in induction, prologue and epilogue in which the relation of audience, author and actors is defined. Despite the violence of some of the author's gestures against the audience, on the whole the audience is praised and deferred to, they are protected from the sustained attack of satirical commentators by Marston's reservations about the validity of the moral standpoint of the satirist, and they are taken fully into the author's confidence about the events on stage. There is, indeed, a real bond between author and audience. Among other things, writing for the children's theatres enables Marston to speak directly to his audience: the author and audience as adults unite to praise or mock the child actors, and to do so Marston refuses to claim the authorial omniscience which is so important a part of the relationship of play and audience in the works of Beaumont and Fletcher. Marston was moreover critically interested in his audience simply in its capacity as spectator, as a body of people who have seen other plays and bring from them a fund of assumptions about the nature of enactment and their own role, which the playwright can accept or question: his far-reaching use of theatrical parody and burlesque urges the audience to be aware all the time of other methods of dramatic expression and other theatrical relationships. Above all, Marston's use of clashing genre-definitions and moral codes, and of the tragicomic double-vision, are not confusing: they rather present, in

rich and convincing detail, a confused world, which is given dramatic form by his constant sense of the presence of the audience and the need of the play to involve them. Marston's interest in his audience, his approach to tragicomedy through satire and parody, and through tragedy, his sense of the tentativeness of genre-definitions and of moral absolutes, are important influences on the plays of John Webster.

"A Play it is ...": Beaumont and Fletcher and the definition of genres.

Even before the establishment of the partnership which was to produce some of the most characteristic of Jacobean tragicomedies, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher had already, separately, tried to define their apprehension of the mixed nature of their work.

Beaumont's The Woman Hater (1606) presents a romantic plot of love and suspicion which is disturbed not only by the pathological misogyny of Gondarino, but also by the grotesquely comic subplot in which the complications of the love-quest are precisely parodied in Lazarillo's hunt for a rare gastronomic titbit. In the prologue to the play Beaumont introduces it as a conscious exercise in the mixture of genres:-

I dare not call it Comedy or Tragedy; 'tis perfectly
neither: A Play it is, which was meant to make you
laugh ... (Waller, vol x, p.71)

Again Beaumont comments on the double impulse behind The Knight of the Burning Pestle, its "privy mark of irony" ("To his many ways endeared friend Master Robert Keysar", 1.5) which its first audience had missed. John Fletcher with almost Jonsonian asperity explained the failure of The Faithful Shepherdess by criticising the ignorance of his audience and explaining his use of the tragicomic genre, an explanation which though brief is the most detailed definition by a

Jacobean practitioner of the form:

A tragie-comedie is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is inough to make it no tragedie, yet brings some near it, which is inough to make it no comedie...

(Glover and Waller, vol 11, p.522)

In a simplified, and rather negative, version of Guarini's definition²⁹, Fletcher insists that tragicomedy is a "mixed" not a "double" form: it does not, that is to say, mix the most extreme expressions of comedy and tragedy, "mirth and killing", but rather steers a middle way in tone and subject-matter.

These early Beaumont and Fletcher plays seem to have been written for the children's theatre³⁰: the development of Jacobean tragicomedy is intimately connected with the rise of the children's theatre with its uniquely close and direct audience-play relationship³¹. At least two of these early tragicomedies were notable failures. Beaumont complains that his audience was impervious to the irony of The Knight of the Burning Pestle, and that they rejected this "merry" (To the Readers"1.8) play because it lacked personal satire and "invective": Fletcher suggests that his audience's assumptions about pastoral and tragicomedy were too crude to handle The Faithful Shepherdess. It seems a little strange that the audience of The Malcontent or of Antonio and Mellida should have had any serious difficulties with these Beaumont and Fletcher plays with their blend of satire and romance³² and their use of a convention simultaneously for serious purpose and for burlesque. Perhaps, though, they felt the lack of the close satirical background of Marston's plays, missed in The Faithful Shepherdess the discussion of the role of the audience and their part in the process of enactment, and in The Knight of the Burning Pestle were disturbed by Beaumont's parody of the deference of the play for its audience.

Despite the failure of these plays, however, the partnership had greater success with later plays like Philaster (1609) and A King and No King (1611), and with the development of their unique "concept of tragicomedy"³³.

Tragicomic discords: Beaumont and Fletcher and the "middle mood".

As I have suggested in my discussion of Tudor "tragicomedy" and of the plays of Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher originated neither the word tragicomedy nor the concept. They do seem to have been responsible, however, for introducing consciously tragicomic plays to the public theatres and their audience, and for introducing new images for tragicomedy - what Clifford Leech calls "unusual wedding-night encounters"³⁴, for instance - and new variations on some of the old images, like that of the testing situation³⁵. Perhaps most important, however, Beaumont and Fletcher established a particular structure for tragicomedy, and a particular mood, the "middle mood"³⁶ in which improbable events in distant lands are shown as relevant to our own experience, consciously unreal events are filled with plausible emotion, and the whole background of fact and assumption on which action rests is shown as shifting and unstable. Again, the partnership was responsible for establishing at least in part the range of subject-matter of tragicomedy. Their mature tragicomedies are firmly based on romantic comedy, with its girls disguised as boys, virtuous men oppressed without reason by humorous tyrants, and extreme dilemmas of love and friendship³⁷. The Fletcher tragicomedies accentuate the danger and passion of these plots, replacing the secure sense of the comic order by satirical undercutting of the events and values of romance, parodic inversion of some of the romance conventions³⁸, and by a constant sense of the

ways in which romantic values diverge from our everyday experience. In the preface to The Faithful Shepherdess Fletcher defined tragic-comedy as a dramatic compromise: the characteristic Fletcherian plot which brings its hero to the foot of the gallows before granting him a reprieve manages to combine the popular happy ending with almost tragic suspense and involvement, a fruitful combination of detachment and involvement which was to shape almost all the tragicomedy of the seventeenth century.

Between the Romantics and our own day it was usual to regard Beaumont and Fletcher as complacent decadents pandering to the prejudices of their audiences, cheerfully immoral and implausibly moralistic by turns, sentimental and escapist, writers who refused to face the implications of the impossible situations they created, and who drowned Jacobean and Caroline drama in a "sea of saccharine"³⁹. More recently, however, it has been possible to see that Beaumont and Fletcher do have serious moral and political concerns⁴⁰ and to recognise the superb theatrical effectiveness of some of their best plays. It has even been possible to discern a curious kind of realism in the way in which genre-distinctions are minimised, and in the way in which characters are "deflected deliberately in the direction of the small, the mean, the average"⁴¹. In particular, Fletcher's discontinuous system of characterisation suggests the point where a conventional system of fictional characterisation breaks down and becomes simplified and falsifying, and the way in which in real life we apprehend other people, without overall pattern, only imperfectly understood, and always capable of convincing surprise and inconsistency.⁴²

One of the most important perceptions of recent Beaumont and Fletcher criticism is the new understanding of their use of

tragicomic "discords", of significant contrast and ironic juxtaposition, and of the way in which their tragicomedy develops not in a simple linear form but in a series of pointed antitheses. L.B. Wallace, for instance, has written convincingly of the way in which the Fletcherian tragicomic structure is determined by the "emotional patterning"⁴³ and the concern which this reflects with "the emotions of the audience". Again, E.M. Waith has shown ways in which Fletcherian tragicomedy is shaped by the antithesis of "satire and pastoral romance" and by the "juxtaposition of opposites" not only between characters and scenes but even within a single character⁴⁴.

Philaster is in many ways typical of the Fletcherian use of discords. Philaster the true heir is contrasted with the usurping king and with the lecherous Spanish prince Pharamond, and the virtuous Arethusa is contrasted with the grotesque wanton Megra. Action develops through contrasted explanations of Arethusa's overtures to Philaster, and through the attribution of contrasting motives to Bellario. At the end of the play contrasts are brought into close juxtaposition in the double identity, boy and girl, of Bellario. Perhaps more important in the play are the profound suggestions of contrasts within characters and especially the way in which the character and the values of Philaster are repeatedly subjected to cold scrutiny, a process which sets up important tensions with the chorus of praise on the surface of the play⁴⁵. In the central scenes of the hunt, for example, Philaster's romantic attempt to wed love and death, and to insist on absolute fidelity is powerfully undermined by the comic disturbance of the Country-fellow who brings a sense of a less rarefied morality ("Hold dastard, strike a Woman!" Grover vol 1, p.125), and who renders ridiculous the groundless fury of Philaster and the aggressive submissiveness of

Arethusa - "What ill-bred man art thou, to intrude thyself/Upon our private sports?..." (p.125). The whole play is reduced to the status of "private sports" and the values of the extreme world of romance are called into question. Similarly in A King and No King our apprehension of Arbaces' tragic and heroic potential is powerfully modified by the parodic presence of Bessus⁴⁶. This tactic of undermining the absolute which the play has seemed to affirm is crucial to the sceptical double-vision of Fletcherian tragicomedy.

After early experiments in the mixture of genres, then, Beaumont and Fletcher developed a characteristic kind of tragicomedy with a characteristic structure in which a series of antitheses is shaped by the tension between the danger of death and its avoidance, a characteristic sceptical and ironic double-vision, and a characteristic mood, a blend of familiar and remote, satire and romance. The plays use the extremes of passion, and widen the emotional range of the drama by suggesting to the audience alternate responses to almost any given situation. Perhaps unlike Marston who approached tragicomedy through tragedy and through the "serious iest" of satire, Fletcher approached it through romantic comedy. Although it is not unlikely that Marston's version of the tragicomic synthesis may have influenced Fletcher's, the two remain rather different forms, both of which were to shape later tragicomedy: Shakespeare's dark comedies, for instance, seem to give a Marstonian interpretation of the form, his romances a Fletcherian. Fletcher's tragicomedies, however, have certain of the preoccupations of Marston's plays: most important, both are sceptical about words, and critically interested in the audience.

"Spectators sate part": the Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies and their audience.

After their first tragicomedies for the children's theatres, Beaumont and Fletcher nowhere elaborate on their definition of tragicomedy. In the same way after these first children's plays, the tragicomedies seem not to present their audience so directly with images of themselves. Marston's plays repeatedly depict their audience on stage. With the exception of Four Plays ... in One Fletcher seems not to have presented the audience directly in his plays at all, although his collaborators Beaumont and Massinger certainly did so: The Knight of the Burning Pestle is an exercise in and a parody of the direct Marstonian audience-play relationship, and The Roman Actor presents several included plays in which the ambiguous activity of the audience is suggested. Even Fletcher's one example of the direct presentation of the audience, Four Plays ... in One, presents not the audience of public or private theatres, but rather the exclusive audience of the court, and the play seems little concerned with defining the relationship of audience and play.

However, although Beaumont and Fletcher rarely depict their audience directly, they were praised from the date of the 164⁷ Folio for the closeness of the audience-play relationship and the way the audience is given a part in the play. T. Palmer of Christ Church Oxford in his inaugural verses to the Folio writes of Fletcher's power of involving his audience:-

Like Scenes, we shifted Passions, and that so,
Who only came to see, turn'd Actors too.

(Glover vol 1, p.xlviii)⁴⁷

The Beaumont and Fletcher plays, then, not only present the audience with direct images of itself, like Marston's and Jonson's: the

fiction extends past the footlights, and the roles of actor and audience merge. Moreover, Palmer writes that the audience was so involved in the play that, at the end, it was necessary for a flat piece of writing to return the audience from the fiction to the workaday world - "we could not stir away/Until the epilogue told us 'twas a Play." Again in these commendatory verses Joseph Maine repeats the claim that the audience has a special status in Fletcher's plays - "Spectators sate part in your Tragedies" (Glover vol 1, p.xxxvi). This importance of the audience has been recognised by modern critics: not only do the playwrights "concentrate on playing on the emotions of the audience"⁴⁸, but it is ultimately the audience's task to reconstruct the play, to solve the problems posed by the discontinuity of character and of moral stance. "We are forced to form our own independent judgments and the ultimate effect of this tactic ... is to make us question the values of almost everyone in the play"⁴⁹.

In the Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies, then, the audience has the status of an actor, as puzzled or partially enlightened as the people in the play, and like them susceptible to or critical of the rhetoric of the play. At the same time they must also imitate the faculty of the playwright in putting the pieces of the plot together. Perhaps this intimate sense that the audience was involved in the process of enactment as an equal partner was one of the reasons that Fletcherian tragicomedies became so popular. The Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies developed a synthesis of the close and direct audience relationship, and the concern for mixed genres, of the children's theatres, and the concern for coherent plot, and for involvement as well as detachment, which is characteristic of the plays of the public theatre. Marston's complex use of prologue and induction stresses from the beginning

that the audience is watching an enacted fiction, and throughout the plays he calls upon us to notice the unreality of what is happening, in play-images, references to the actor and his role, and in ironic commentary, burlesque and repetition. Beaumont and Fletcher approach from the opposite direction: on the whole they make little use of prologue and induction, and their first scenes try from the beginning to involve the audience in the fiction, to persuade them to accept the play as a kind of reality. Nonetheless, this involvement can be ironically qualified or suddenly broken, as it is in the scene with the Country-fellow in Philaster. Marston starts from a point of detachment, Beaumont and Fletcher from a point of involvement, but neither viewpoint continues long unchecked or unquestioned. In a sense it looks as if Beaumont and Fletcher in some ways predict the audience-play relation of the plays of the picture-stage in that the audience is distantly involved rather than directly mirrored, and is called upon to watch rather than to direct the action of the play⁵⁰. On the other hand the seesaw of involvement and detachment, the way we are encouraged to look at the events of the play from outside as well as from within the play's frame of reference, and the sense in which the audience is used as an actor in the play, all these create a unique kind of drama and a unique audience-play relationship.

Because Beaumont and Fletcher moved freely between public and private theatres they were not restricted to one set of dramatic definitions. In the ways in which the tragicomedies regulate the relationship between the fiction and real life, the Fletcher plays use rather different images from Marston's plays or from those of the public stage. The formal play within the play, a favourite method of mediating between audience and play in public and private theatres, is of negligible importance in Fletcher's

plays, and a Marstonian use of direct genre-description and of prologue and induction is not on the whole an important part of the effect. Perhaps the most important of Fletcher's ways of regulating the relationship of audience and play is by the tragicomic discord, the disruption of the comic or the high romantic moment. One symptom of this is the use of surprise to overturn and invert the established relationship of audience to fiction: I shall discuss this in greater detail in my next chapter.

However the Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies are not entirely devoid of some of the conventional ways of discussing the audience-play relationship. The masque, as the theatrical form above all others in which the audience is allegorically mirrored and directly involved, is often included in the plays as a way of discussing the central relationship of audience and fiction and the activity of watching and of participating in dramatic presentations. In The Custom of the Country, for instance, a brief entertainment is presented in which Zenocia, in a parodic marriage-masque in which she appears as Diana the virgin huntress, turns her arrow against the lustful Count who is about to claim his droit de seigneur. Here this parody of a marriage-masque cuts across the ambiguous preparations for the wedding, as Zenocia's father decks with black streamers the marriage-bed which is the "scaffold" and "funeral" of his daughter's honour, and commands the attendants to "sing mournfully the sad Epithalamium" (vol 1, p.314, 313). In a tragicomic double-take, the conventional metaphor of the virgin Diana in the masque becomes a literal representation of militant chastity. The surprise of the spectator of the masque, Count Clodio, at this sudden undercutting of conventional iconography is of the same kind as that of the audience: by watching a half-satirical depiction of

our own response to the enacted fiction we are implicated in the play and, as so often in the tragicomedies of Beaumont and Fletcher, we feel that the play is talking particularly closely to us.

The Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies, then, are particularly concerned with the audience as actor and even with the audience as assistant playwright, mirroring the reactions of the audience in the play, using images like the discussion of fiction or the included masque to define the relationship of audience to play. There is perhaps less direct discussion of genre and less direct presentation of the audience than in the plays of Marston, but as I shall suggest the same effects are obtained in less direct ways. However in at least one important method of mediating between audience and play Fletcher follows Marston: the discussion of language.

"I know not your Rhetorick": linguistic disturbance in the Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies.

The Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies present experience as a flux, an unstable system where any fact or assumption might be suddenly undermined, so that a person who had seemed to be a boy turns out to be a girl, or vice versa, two lovers turn out to be brother and sister, or brother and sister turn out not to be related, implacable hate is rendered reversible, and even a sentence of death is not final⁵¹. One of the most important images of this tragicomic instability of facts and assumptions is Fletcher's treatment of the untrustworthiness of language.

For a long time, it has been recognised that Beaumont and

Fletcher's plays make much use of rhetorical language, even using plots from that handbook for orators the Contraversiae of Seneca the Elder. E.M. Waith, for instance, suggests that "The pattern of tragicomedy imposes a special language, whose effect ... is above all emotional"⁵². Convincing feeling is generated in speeches in a context when this is known to be unreal: in A Wife for a Moneth, for instance, the virtuous Evanthe speaks to the Queen about her own infidelity with the Queen's husband, an infidelity which has never happened and will never happen (Wife, vol V, pp.7-8). However, as the Beaumont and Fletcher plays seem acutely aware of the collapse of the social structures of the sixteenth century,⁵³ they also seem aware of the collapse of sixteenth century rhetoric. Passionate and highly coloured rhetorical speeches are undercut, sometimes by ironic positioning, sometimes by direct criticism. In Philaster, for instance, the Country-fellow who introduces important disturbances to the high romantic world of the fourth act also disturbs the rhetoric of love and death, of exaggerated violence and exaggerated submissiveness - "I know not your Rhetorick, but I can lay it on you if you touch the woman ..." (vol 1, p.125)⁵⁴.

Again, in at least two of the tragicomedies the situation is created by the breakdown of traditional rhetoric. In The Mad Lover the Princess whimsically takes literally Memnon's wish to give her his "loving heart,/A truly loving heart" (vol III, p.15). In A Wife for a Moneth Frederick, the "unnatural and libidinous ... usurper" ("Persons Represented in the Play") insists on giving a literal interpretation to the claim of Valerio's love-poem to Evanthe -

To be your own but one poor Month, I'd give
My Youth, my Fortune, and then leave to live. (V, p.11)

The conventional metaphors of love are seen as untrustworthy: literal and metaphorical language, like the metaphorical dimensions of the masque, are blurred and confused, as the conventional rhetoric collapses. Tragicomedy exploits this divergence between kinds of language, the interchange of literal and metaphorical, and the difficulty of communication in a world where no person can fully understand any other, and where language hinders real communication as much as it helps. In a curious sense language is seen as creating as well as expressing action: it is the perfect emblem for action which is at once real and unreal, for emotion which is convincing and passionately felt but which has no root in the situation as it is.

Perhaps A King and No King is especially interested in the way action is modified by language. The play constantly stresses the power, and the impotence, of words. At one point Arbaces laments that his "words move nothing" (I.i.306), at another he introduces Tigranes to his people as one "whose very name you feared" (II.ii.98). Even more significantly, Arbaces sees the obstacle to an incestuous union with Panthea as simply the words brother and sister, "merely voice" (IV.iv.126). It is words which bring about everybody's happy ending: the word "queen" ironically stops Lygones' tirade against his daughter as "whore" (V.ii.30-63). People repeatedly break off to comment on their own or other people's rhetoric: in the comic half of the plot, for instance, Bessus' swordsmen comment on the words "grant" and "must" (IV.iii.95-100). In a sense it seems that the basic concerns of the play are not personal, political or moral, but semantic: the very title of the play is a semantic puzzle. Whereas Marston is interested in the inarticulate, Fletcher is perhaps interested in the over-

articulate, in ways in which unnecessarily elaborate forms of language modify experience, and in which conventional rhetoric has collapsed, leaving only the forms behind. Marston is most concerned with the inadequacy of man for language and of language for man, Fletcher with the concrete force of language and with the breakdown of traditional rhetoric. Fletcher's plays, as E.M. Waith has pointed out, use a particular rhetoric, but in the best plays it is never used uncritically.

For Beaumont and Fletcher and for Marston, their experiments in the mixture of genres take central place in their work, so that comedies and tragedies assume the colouring and interests of tragicomedy. Their tragicomedies develop in a series of antitheses, modelled by ironic contrast and ironic juxtaposition, repetition and contradiction, so that we are "never allowed to think only in one way about anything"⁵⁵. The plays present a confused world, a world of collapsing moral and aesthetic values. Tragicomedy avoids death or ironically undercuts it, simultaneously affirms and undermines hyperbole, and disturbs any moment of apparently simple comic or tragic feeling by creating a complex system of discords. Above all, tragicomedy seems particularly concerned with depicting its audience, with presenting it with images of itself, or by involving it as an actor in the play itself. The relationship of audience and play is controlled by direct presentation of the audience or direct discussion of genre, or more indirectly, by the use of play or masque within the play or by other images of fiction. Especially important is the way in which tragicomedy undermines the rhetoric of its characters and suggests the ambiguous nature of verbal communication. The tragicomedy of Marston and of Beaumont and Fletcher is an ironic, sceptical,

allusive form, unwilling to falsify experience by simple declarations or by simple genre-description.

Tragicomedy from Heywood to Brome: A Summary.

From the 1560s to the 1590s, as I have suggested, "tragicall comedie" seemed most conscious of its affinities with tragedy. In the hands of Fletcher and Marston it became, structurally at least, closer to comedy. In the period from the 1620s to 1642 tragicomedy for the most part followed Fletcher. There were some playwrights, however, notably Heywood, who experiment in returning to an earlier definition of tragicomedy as modified tragedy.

No writer of tragicomedy was impervious to the influence of Fletcher. Shirley's tragicomedies, Heywood's The Royal King and the Loyal Subject⁵⁶, Massinger's The Bondman, Brome's The English Moor, all adapt the Fletcherian pattern of tragicomedy. Even Ford's The Queen seems a deliberate, and fairly successful, imitation of Fletcher, with its plot of love and jealousy, and its final reconciliation on the steps of the scaffold. These plays use the Fletcherian system of extreme antitheses, surprise, danger, and the last-minute escape from death, but on the whole they lack the incisive wit of Fletcher's tragicomedies, and their criticism as well as exploitation of rhetoric and convention. The most interesting plays of the period attempt not to imitate Fletcher, but to rebuild the transitional genres, to find new ways of expressing the tragicomic discords and double visions.

In the work of both Massinger and Ford the boundaries of the genres blur and in the case of Ford generic labels become

almost meaningless. Massinger brings a new sombreness and sourness to the conclusions of his tragicomedies, deliberately leaving loose ends or adding disturbing reservations to the happy ending. Even his comedies insist that the final reconciliation may exclude many of the characters. In the final act of A New Way to Pay Old Debts the grotesque usurer Overreach goes mad and attempts to murder his own daughter - indeed the role of Overreach was a favourite of the tragic actor Edmund Kean. Moreover even Wellborn departs to resume his career as a soldier rather than joining in the comic conclusion of feasting and marriages.

The Maid of Honour is perhaps Massinger's most successful attempt to synthesise the Fletcherian tragicomic pattern with his rigorous Christian scepticism about the Fletcherian absolutes of love and honour. The play for its first four acts seems to turn on the passionate Bertoldo's choice between the heroine Camiola who has ransomed him and whom he has promised to marry, and the Duchess Aurelia with whom, suddenly and irrationally, he falls in love. However the final scene reveals that this has simply obscured the basic conflict, and that Bertoldo's problem is not choosing between Aurelia and Camiola, or even between love and honour, but between his attachment to the world and his religious vows as a Knight of Malta, which he was on the verge of breaking. The play sets up and rejects the Fletcherian absolutes of love and honour, and the shift in perspective between the worldly and the Christian conflict of loyalties sets up the same kind of disturbance of the dramatic syllogism as the last act of A King and No King.

At the end of The Maid of Honour Camiola enters the Church, making a religious, not a worldly, "marriage" (p.394), and Bertoldo resumes^s his vows in order to "Redeem his mortgaged

honour" (p.395). The happy ending is discordant and tentative: cutting across the imagery of marriage are ominous suggestions of tragedy. Camiola has become "dead to the world" (p.395) by her religious vow, and she takes her "last farewell" (p.395) of her friends. Bertoldo ends the play not with marriage and peace, but about to return to the wars. It is a happy ending charged with pathos since so many characters are excluded. The faithful Adorni is rewarded generously in financial terms, but he too is doomed to single life. So is the unfortunate Aurelia, at one moment bride to be, at the next abandoned in favour first of Camiola and then of the religious life, who watches silently as Camiola stage-manages the changing relationships. Massinger uses the images of Fletcherian tragicomedy, misunderstanding, marriage and reconciliation, but he interprets them in an unconventional way in which tragedy and comedy clash disturbingly.

Ford's plays, with their stress on pathos and silent suffering and their strange, "dreamlike"⁵⁷ atmosphere, also blur the dividing lines between the genres. Even The Broken Heart allows tragedy and comedy to collide. The play might describe itself, like Euphranea's account of her love, as "language suited/To a divided mind" (1.iii.66-7). Penthea sees her own life as a kind of tragicomedy,

Some scenes of vanity, drawn out at length
By varied pleasures, sweetened in the mixture,
But tragical in issue. (111.v.17-19)

Finally Calantha dies "smiling" (V.iii.76). Ford's tragicomedies use the Fletcherian structure of averted danger, but they tone it down: what is averted is rarely physical danger, but most characteristically danger to a woman's reputation, as in The Lady's Trial, or The Fancies Chaste and Noble. Ford's use of tragicomic surprise,

too, seems less surprising than that of Fletcher. The title of The Fancies Chaste and Noble alerts us to the fact that the girls are innocent, and in The Lover's Melancholy the fact that Parthenophil is really a girl in disguise is an open secret for much of the play, a secret which is even parodied in the sub-plot. This subdued, low-key, tentative quality of Ford's tragicomedies is also carried on to the play-endings. The Queen, for instance, reaches a "calm" after "storms" (3872), but the most that it can say about the happy ending is

Now we have past
The worst, and all I hope is well at last.

(3873-4)

Ford's tragicomedies develop a characteristic double vision not only in their description of mixed feelings and in this presentation of a subdued happy ending, but also through their use of the double plot. In The Lover's Melancholy the main plot, where Eroclea returns to her lover Palador disguised as the page Parthenophil, is precisely parodied in the sub-plot, where the ludicrous Cucullus is persuaded that his male page is a disguised girl. Similarly in The Fancies Chaste and Noble the coarse subplot in which Spadone pretends to be a eunuch comments ironically on the actual impotence of Octavio in the main plot. In each case the sub-plot is a negative image of the main plot, an image which contrasts ironically with the idealised Eroclea or the gracious Octavio. In Philaster Fletcher complicates our response to his hero by undermining his heroic claims and by placing him at the centre of a network of double images. Ford contrasts the main plot with an anti-heroic plot in which the absolutes of love and honour, fidelity and courtesy, appear in grotesquely parodic form. It is perhaps a slightly cruder technique than Fletcher's, but it also produces a powerful tragicomic double vision.

Massinger's tragicomedies rarely reflect the audience directly although The Maid of Honour finally returns the play to "this stage of life" (p.396), and we are reminded of similarities, and differences, between the fiction and the real life which it reflects. Ford is more interested in returning the audience from the fiction to everyday life at the end of the play, and in using conventional images for this movement, like the masque. Play after play comments on the main action in song and masque. The main plot, indeed, tends to be resolved well before the end of the play. In The Lover's Melancholy the main plot is completed by the end of Act IV, where Palador is reunited with Eroclea, and in The Fancies Chaste and Noble the main plot is more or less completed in the penultimate scene. In his tragicomedies Ford seems to need a scene, or even a whole act, to move the audience back from the enacted fiction to real life. In The Fancies Chaste and Noble the plot is completed with marriage and reconciliation, and with a rather subdued joy tinged with pathos - "The Bower of Fancies is quite wither'd" (p.213). The main plot leads into a masque, a "merriment" (p.215) about love presented to the lovers "to show how love o'erways All men of several conditions" (p.215). This Masque of Love comments on the play itself and leads the audience out of its fictions. Finally the mediating epilogue completes the movement from fiction to real life as the plot of the play is seen as somehow commenting on the nature of drama, the "Fancy and Judgement" which are "a Play's whole matter" (p.217).

Ford and Massinger blur the lines between the genres. Heywood was interested in many forms of the mixed play, Fletcherian plays like The Royal King and the Loyal Subject, patriotic-romantic extravaganza like The Fair Maid of the West, history and myth interspersed with clowning, like the Ages plays. His most startling

divergence from Fletcherian practice, though, is in some plays in which tragicomedy is firmly based on tragedy, and especially The English Traveller and The Rape of Lucrece. The English Traveller is described as "A Strange Play" (Vol 1V, p.6) since it contains none of the elaborate visual effects we might expect from tragicomedy:

No Combate, Marriage, not so much to day
As Song, Dance, Masque, to bumbaste out a play.
(Vol. 1V, p.6)

It provides simply "Bare Lines" (p.6). It is a "Strange Play" in more than its bareness, though. The plot is potentially tragic, but it is set against a farcical sub-plot which, rather in the tone of Middletonian city comedy, paraphrases a major theme of the main plot, the relationship between an old and a young man. In the main plot Young Geraldine loves the young wife of Old Wincott, who treats the young man with great affection. The two vow to marry after Wincott's death, while remaining chaste during his lifetime. Geraldine's false friend Dalavill, however, has seduced the weak Mrs. Wincott, and when Geraldine discovers this the woman dies of shame and a broken heart. The play is deliberately untidy and anti-climactic and potential tragedy is undercut by the insistence on mixed feelings which the ending provides. Reignald, for instance, sees

Burying of wives,
As stale as shifting shirts ...
(p.93).

The potential "Feast" is turned "into a Funerall" (p.94), but Young Geraldine and Wincott are to

feast, and after Mourne ...
Weare Blacks without, but other Thoughts within
(p.95).

Moreover the play, like The Maid of Honour, ends, despite the promise of the prologue, with the comic image of marriage which is

given an unconventional interpretation. The play ends with a "Marriage of ... Love" (p.94) between Old Wincott and Young Geraldine. Tragedy and comedy collide,

to mingle with our mirth
This terrour and affright

(p.92)

The Rape of Lucrece also establishes a tragic structure but undermines it. Heywood might have called this too "A Strange Play". He actually calls it "A True Roman Tragedy", and we might feel that he protests too much with this double insistence on the play's tragic nature. The play falls very clearly into two parts. The first half is crammed with clowns and gentlemen wearing an antic disposition, with songs, especially comic or outrageously bawdy songs, with jokes, puns, and satirical commentary, with laughter and the language of comedy. In a profoundly disordered society, ruled by a cruel usurper, the genres too are disordered. In a desperate attempt at self-preservation, the Roman nobles hide their true feelings in songs, jokes and foolery - "Is it not better to sing with our heads on, then to bleed with our heads off?" (Vol.5, p.196). With the suicide of Lucrece, though, the quality of the play changes. There are no more jokes, songs, or references to laughter. The Roman nobles discard the appearance of comedy, turn on the Tarquins and destroy them.

However The Rape of Lucrece establishes the tragicomic double vision not only in this clear dichotomy between the play's two parts. The presentation of the rape itself is profoundly ambiguous. The play presents Lucrece as a type of virtue, "Roman Lucrece" (p.197), the ideal woman and wife, and in isolation the rape has a certain stylised pathos. Nonetheless it is surrounded on all sides by irreverent comedy and obscenity. After the rape Valerius, an ally of Collatine and his wife, joins the clown in

singing obscene songs about her. The bawdy catch about the rape with its chorus of laughter especially complicates our attitude to this central incident and undermines its tragic potential:

Did he take faire Lucrece by the toe man?
 Toe man.
 I man.
 Ha ha ha ha ha man.
 And further did he strive to go man?
 Goe man.
 I man.
 Ha ha ha ha man, fa derry derry downe ha fa derry dino
 (p.232).

The rape precipitates the tragic conclusion, but is itself presented so ambiguously that we are involved in a "genuine dilemma of feeling" 58.

The Rape of Lucrece is perhaps not a complete success. The change in quality in the middle of the play mirrors the movement of the characters from disorientation to a definite decision about how to behave, but this move from doubt to certainty is not one which the audience is helped to share. Indeed the play gives the audience little help in readjusting between the two halves of the play, or between the fiction and real life as the play ends. The English Traveller is more coherent in guiding the audience towards this final readjustment. The final scenes of the play make much use of play imagery. Reignald, the crafty servant of the sub-plot, hides himself in the upper stage, and looks

like the picture of Dame Fortune
 Before the Fortune Play-house
 (Vol. 1V, p.84).

The audience in the Cockpit is brought back to contemporary London and reminded that what they are watching is an enacted fiction. Later Mrs. Wincott refuses to speak to her seducer, but answers him only "in seeming show" (p.88). Finally Young Geraldine determines to "play the Doctor" (p.90) to Mrs. Wincott's sinful soul. As the play ends images of play and acting, role and theatre become an

important part of the effect, and the audience is alerted to the distinction between enactment and life, and prepared for the return from one to the other. Moreover, an important theme of the play is the distinction between real and vicarious experience. Geraldine has travelled: Dalavill has only read about travelling (p.8). Later it is Geraldine who is content with vicarious experience while Dalavill is actually debauching Mrs. Wincott: Geraldine

doate [s] upon the shadow,
But another he beares away the substance
(p.57).

Perhaps the audience is reminded to apply this distinction between real and vicarious experience to the play itself, and to become aware of the movement from fiction to real life.

In the period from the 1620s to the closure of the theatres, tragicomedy experimented with new moods and structures - the subdued endings of Massinger, sceptical about the Fletcherian absolutes, the low-key endings of Ford with their blurring of fact and fiction, Heywood's "strange" plays which undercut tragedy. Webster may have been influenced by these experiments: in many ways Appius and Virginia is a clear companion-piece for The Rape of Lucrece. Moreover, he may also have been influenced by Massinger's sour and sceptical tragicomedy: the last act of The Devil's Law-case, like that of The Maid of Honour, moves from misunderstanding to a stylised lyric about the gulf between appearance and reality, and to an unconventional recasting of the happy ending of marriage and reconciliation. In my third chapter I shall look in more detail at the endings of tragicomedies, and especially of The Malcontent and A King and No King. I shall discuss ways in which the tragicomic ending mediates for the audience between the world and the play: in particular I shall be concerned with the part played by surprise, and by the play's definitions of their fictional natures.

NOTES

1. Elizabethan tragicomic and comic drama depends to some extent on its double vision, the awareness of the dichotomy of actor and role: in the children's theatres this dichotomy was carried to extremes, as is recognised in the induction to Antonio and Mellida. For an account of the children's troupes, and especially their capacity for burlesque, see H.N. Hillebrand, The Child Actors (Urbana 1926), Alfred Harbage, Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions (Bloomington 1952, esp pp. 29-57), Anthony Caputi, John Marston, Satirist (Ithaca NY, 1961, pp. 80-116), Michael Shapiro, "Children's Troupes: Dramatic Illusion and Acting Style" (Comparative Drama 9, 1969, pp. 42-53), "Towards a reappraisal of the Children's Troupes" (Theatre Survey 13, 1972 pp. 1-19) and "Audience vs Dramatist in Jonson's Epicoene and other plays of the Children's Troupes" (ELR 3 1973 pp. 400-417). And see also Jackson Cope, "Marlowe's Dido and the Titillating Children" (ELR 4, 1974 pp. 315-25).
2. For the satiric significance of the name Pasquil see Alvin Kernan, The Cankered Muse (New Haven 1959) pp. 51-53.
3. Many critics have refused to accept Marston's description of his divided intentions in this poem, finding it a disingenuous attempt to escape deserved accusations of obscenity. John Peter writes that if it is a parody, it is a "ludicrously bad one" and that Marston's disavowal of its eroticism was "largely an afterthought" (John Peter, Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature 1956, p.157). Samuel Schoenbaum

finds a pathological disgust at "elementary biological facts" (p.1075) behind the poem and considers this "infantile repugnance" (p.1075) to explain the poet's "divided response of attraction and revulsion" (p.1074) ("The Precarious Balance of John Marston" PMLA 67 1952 pp. 1069-1078). Some later critics, however, have been prepared to take Marston's statement of divided impulses more seriously. G.K. Hunter writes of "the double vision of his Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image, at once erotic and anti-erotic" (Antonio and Mellida 1965, p.xvii). Anthony Caputi (op. cit., p.18) sees the poem as having "the structure of a coherent, extremely ingenious, if not altogether satisfactory, burlesque". P.J. Finkelppearl (John Marston of the Middle Temple Cambridge Mass. 1969 pp. 95-104) has read the poem as a serious plea for mutual enjoyment in love rather than distant and ridiculous worship. Finally, J. Scott Colley, " 'Opinion' and the Reader in John Marston's The Metamorphosis of Pigmaalions Image" (ELR 3 1973 pp. 221-231) has showed how the poem's satirical side functions by involving the audience in the same substitution of fantasy for fact of which Pigmalion is accused.

4. J. Scott Colley, op. cit, p.222.
5. Cf, for instance, the repetition and ironic praise of his audience in the verse at the end of "In Lectores prorsus indignos" in The Scourge of Villanie.
6. To Pigmalion, to the first book of The Scourge, verse appended to satire XI of The Scourge, dedication to the first book of The Scourge.
7. Castilio in Antonio and Mellida, for instance, originates in the satires (eg in The Scourge satire lll.)
8. See Allardyce Nicoll, " 'Tragical-comical-historical-pastoral':

Elizabethan dramatic nomenclature" (Bulletin of the John Rylands Library XLIII 1960-1) p.82.

9. The "fabulae Argumentum" of The Dutch Courtesan also refers to the play as a "comedy", but it is possible that this simply refers to the Cocledemoy sub-plot.
10. Caputi, op. cit, p.216.
11. Even Sophonisba is disturbed by grotesque comedy as Syphax finds the witch, and then a black eunuch, in his bed instead of Sophonisba - although Caputi, p.241, finds in the play a "complete ... abandonment of the satiric attitude."
12. J.R. Mulryne, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedy" (John Webster, Brian Morris ed, 1970) p.135.
13. Cf. the resurrection in Dekker's Satiromastix, for instance.
14. And cf. the many ironic references to The Spanish Tragedy - despite the problem of dates, the Painter scene in AandM V.i., seems to have some relationship to the additions to The Spanish Tragedy, and Balurdo's entrance "with a beard half off, half on" in A's R ll.i.21 parodies The Spanish Tragedy lV.iii.18ff.
15. Parody and burlesque, of course, are also important ways of preserving the tragicomic double vision.
16. "Nature" and "natural" are key words in the play - cf especially ll.i.114- "philosophy and nature are all one", ll.ii.204-6 - "O wit, how vile, /How hellish art thou when thou raisest nature/Gainst sacred faith!" , and V.ii.10-11 - "To sufer wounds when one may 'scape the rod/Is against nature, that is, against God!"
17. Marston's plays and poems almost always present ambivalently the faculty of the moralist - cf Luscus' father in The Scourge lll, whose moralising drives his son into ever worse perversions.

18. L.B. Wallace, Fletcher, Beaumont and Company (Morningside Heights NY, 1947) p.175.
19. Michael Shapiro, "Audience vs Dramatist in Jonson's Epicoene and other plays of the Children's Troupes" (ELR 3, 1973) p.405.
20. Shapiro, op cit, p.405.
21. The induction to The Malcontent openly mocks the member of the audience with his feather and his sense of his own importance. In What You Will the view of the audience is slightly less obviously satirical, or rather the satire is extended to include, as well as the audience, the child actors and the author himself.
22. Cf. the "armed Epilogue" to Antonio and Mellida. This seems to be a critical allusion to the "armed Prologue" (1.66) of Jonson's The Poetaster. Jonson's prologue stresses, characteristically, his own integrity and his contempt for "detractors" (1.69). Marston's epilogue inverts the image and disavows its self-confidence - "I stand not as a peremptory challenger of desert, either for him that composed the comedy or for us that acted it, but a most submissive suppliant for both." (Epilogue ls 1-4).
23. Samuel Schoenbaum, "The Precarious Balance of John Marston" (PMLA 67 1952) p.1070.
24. The Babel/Babylon pun also occurs in The Spanish Tragedy 1V.i. 195. And cf. The Dutch Courtesan 111.i.209 Freevil asks Malheureux "What news from Babylon?" when Malheureux has come from Franceschina, referring not only to Babylon the city of sin, but also to Babel, the place of the confusion of languages, reflected by the Courtesan's broken English.
25. The Malcontent is full of word-chains, lists, newly coined compound words - "mutual-friendly-reciprocal kind of steady-

- unanimous-heartily-leagued ..." (l.iv.77-8), stand-up comedy routines, elaborate set speeches (cf, Mendoza's two parallel speeches for and against women - l.v. 19ff, l.vi. 77ff) puns and Latin tags.
26. G.K. Hunter, Antonio and Mellida (1965), p.xix.
 27. In AandM lV.i.225-7 there is an enigmatic claim that the author has added the Italian speeches out of "some private respect" which the audience are asked to bear in mind. It would be interesting to know what these private respects were, apart from an interest in The Spanish Tragedy and in the failure of language.
 28. For an article on the interest in rhetoric in The Spanish Tragedy see Jonas Barish, "The Spanish Tragedy, or The Pleasures and Perils of Rhetoric" (Elizabethan Theatre, Brown and Harris eds. Stratford upon Avon Studies 9, 1966) pp.59-85.
 29. Gilbert, op cit, p.511 - 'He who composes tragicomedy takes from tragedy its great persons but not its great actions ... its movement of the feelings but not its disturbance of them, its pleasure but not its sadness, its danger but not its death; from comedy it takes laughter that is not excessive, modest amusement, feigned difficulty, happy reversal and above all the comic order...'
 30. According to Harbage, Annals of English Drama (1964), The Woman Hater belonged to Paul's Boys, The Knight of the Burning Pestle perhaps to the Queen's Revels and The Faithful Shepherdess also perhaps to the Queen's Revels.
 31. Jonson's Epicoene, for instance, not only makes a tragicomic use of surprise, but even includes "a tragi-comoedy betweene the Guelphe and the Ghibellines, Daw and La-Foole..." (lll.v.31).

32. E.M. Waith, The Pattern of Tragicomedy in Beaumont and Fletcher (1952) p.33.
33. Waith, op cit, p.2.
34. Clifford Leech, The John Fletcher Plays (1962), p.22.
35. For a treatment of Fletcher's use of the chastity test, see Nancy Cotton Pearse, John Fletcher's Chastity Plays: Mirrors of Modesty (Lewisburg 1973).
36. Una Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (1936) p.205.
37. In many ways As You Like It precisely predicts some of the interests of tragicomedy - see chapter Four below.
38. Cf, for instance the faithful page in The Honest Man's Fortune whom it is frequently suggested is really a girl in love with her master, but who turns out to be only a faithful page.
39. Rupert Brooke, John Webster and Elizabethan Drama (1916) p.75.
40. See, for instance, Peter Davison, "The Serious Concerns of Philaster" (ELH 30, 1963) and Arthur Mizener, "The High Design of A King and No King" (MP 38, 1940-1) pp. 133-154.
41. Ian Fletcher, Beaumont and Fletcher (1967) p.8.
42. On the characterisation of Beaumont and Fletcher see Waith, op cit, and "Characterisation in John Fletcher's Tragicomedies" (RES 19, 1943) where he suggests that to the seventeenth century it must have been obvious that Fletcher was "introducing an unorthodox method of handling character" (p.141), a system of "hypothetical" characters who live "only in isolated moments and not continuously" (p.163).
43. L.B. Wallace, op. cit. p.212.
44. On the characterisation of the plays see Waith and Ellis-Fermor, op. cit.
45. See P.J. Finkelpearl, "Beaumont, Fletcher, and 'Beaumont and

- Fletcher': some distinctions" (ELR 3, 1973, pp. 154-156) on the ambivalent character of Philaster - and Leech, op cit, p.89.
46. And of The Maids Tragedy which in many ways is, apart from the final deaths, indistinguishable from tragicomedy - here the suicide of Evadne is disturbed by her own brother's view of it as merely "A thing to laugh at" (vol 1 p.74).
47. This discussion of the actor-audience relationship is particularly concerned with plays of the "Tragicke Muse", but it is possible that the distinction is simply between "funny" and "serious" plays, and that the tragicomedies might be included as plays of the "Tragicke Muse".
48. Wallace, op cit, p.218.
49. P.J. Finkelpearl, "Beaumont and Fletcher and 'Beaumont and Fletcher': some distinctions" (ELR 3, 1973) pp. 153-154.
50. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the plays were so enthusiastically revived at the Restoration?
51. Bellario in Philaster is just one of many girls disguised as boys: in The Loyal Subject Young Archas is disguised as a girl. In Women Pleased the lovers turn out to be brother and sister, as their names, Claudio and Isabella, might have suggested to us. In A King and No King, of course, Arbaces and Penthea turn out not to be related.
52. E.M. Waith, Pattern (op. cit.), p.170.
53. See John Danby, "Beaumont and Fletcher: Jacobean Absolutists" (Poets on Fortune's Hill, 1952, pp. 152-183).
54. According to Finkelpearl (op. cit.) this tendency to undermine rhetoric is particularly that of Beaumont (p.145). Compare the end of The Maid's Tragedy, where Calianax's genuine grief undermines the mannered rhetoric of the others - "And you all have fine new tricks to grieve; but I ne're knew any but

direct crying" (Vol. 1, p.74).

55. Clifford Leech, op. cit., p.47.
56. Heywood's The Royal King and the Loyal Subject (1602) seems to be earlier than even the earliest Fletcherian tragicomedy. However Heywood never really developed this kind of tragicomedy: this was left for Beaumont and Fletcher.
57. T.S. Eliot, "John Ford" (Elizabethan Dramatists, 1963), p.121.
58. J.R. Mulryne, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedy" (John Webster, Brian Morris ed., 1970), p.135.

CHAPTER THREE

"Interlocutions with the audients": the tragicomic ending and the audience in The Malcontent and A King and No King.

As I have suggested, the relationship between audience and play underwent some important changes over the period from about 1580 to the 1630s. Richard Brome's brilliant comedy "about the art of comedy"¹ The Antipodes looks back from the point of vantage of the late 1630s over the whole field of Renaissance comedy and makes a direct comment on one aspect of this changing relationship. The stage-managing play enthusiast Letoy criticises the actor Byplay for not confining himself to speaking the words set down for him to his "coactors in the scene" but also holding "interlocutions with the audients" (ll.ii.44-5)². Byplay excuses himself on the grounds of tradition - "That is a way, my lord, has bin allow'd/On elder stages ..." (46,7). Letoy brushes this aside: "in the days of Tarlton and Kemp,/Before the stage was purg'd from barbarism" (48-9) such a blurring of the line between fiction and real life might have been permitted. Now the "perfection" of the stage forbids it. In the days of Tarlton and Kemp the actors spoke directly to their audience, and did so on their own account, improvising and ad libbing, involving the audience in a living and changing presentation. Now in the new "perfection" of the theatre it is the "poets" (52) who control the plays and who speak to the audience. At the centre of this changing relationship of author, actors and audience, it seems to me, is the newly popular form of tragicomedy. The new importance of the playwright on which

Brome comments, and the indirect use of the audience as "coactors in the scene" is nowhere more obvious than in the plays of Marston and of Beaumont and Fletcher.

Modern critics have directed their condemnation of tragicomedy most often to the endings of the plays. T.B. Tomlinson, in a study which uses terms like "decadence" in a hostile treatment of tragicomedy, sees the endings of Fletcherian tragicomedy, and especially of A King and No King, as "irresponsible", "reasonably good escapist fun and nothing more"³. He finds the plots marked by "sentimentality, melodrama, unrelated comic 'relief'" (p.251), and he claims that the endings are twisted "with a careless indifference to issues that, in terms of the play, demand to be faced" (p.215). Critic after critic judges tragicomedy as if it were failed tragedy, as a form in which the author, unable to sustain the potential tragedy suggested by the first acts, is content to tumble down into bathos - "The fabric of the tragedy dissolves ..."⁴. Even critics not hostile to tragicomedy in general usually focus their disapproval on the endings of particular plays, finding them "blurred"⁵, destroyed by "frivolous complications of plot and contradictions of character"⁶, "contrived ... artificially"⁷. Now it is certainly true, to use George Eliot's terms, that the tragicomic ending is particularly likely to function as a "negation" of the passions, the terrors, and even the facts which the play has established. However in the best plays the dramatist, by careful direction of the audience's response and by a rigorous description of the play's fictional and generic nature prevents a simple collapse of the interest and value of the play. In this chapter, by a close investigation of the last scenes of two of the best pre-Websterian tragicomedies, I shall point out ways in which the

"negation" of the tragicomic ending is accepted and is given a positive and constructive application.

"What strange delusions": the tragicomic ending of The Malcontent.

The Malcontent clearly moves towards a comic reconciliation. Webster's induction defines its mixed genre (ls 43-4) and emphatically suggests that we are to see "a bitter play" (ls 42,50). The play proper opens with a striking image of the discordant nature of tragicomedy, "The vilest out of tune music" (1.i. initial SD), "the discord rather than the music" (1.ii.2), and with Malevole's anarchic description of his own satiric function - "as gum into taffeta, to fret, to fret" (1.ii.11-12). It ends with the reimposition of harmony in masque and dance and with Altofront's return to power and to his own true identity as philosopher-king. The play develops in a characteristic system of discords, ironic repetition, and a typically Marstonian alternation of over-statement and reticence. The first four acts establish with telling detail a convincing background of corruption, of deliberate evil like Mendoza's and of sensuality distorted into grotesque forms by a sick sense of the passage of time, like Maquerelle's, or by total self-absorption, like Bilioso's or Ferneze's: Altofront/Malevole's double nature and his bilingual understanding of the anomalous position of the good man in a vicious society embodies in extreme form the principles of the tragicomic discord. The final scene of the play presents two of the period's most characteristic images of ending, the formal casting off of disguise by Altofront and the masque which heralds the resumption of harmony and the ending of fiction. As we might expect from Marston, however, neither of these

images is used simply: comic and tragic impulses face each other and are subsumed in the tragicomic synthesis of reconciliation and the expulsion of evil.

The last scene of the play opens with the courtiers taking their seats for Celso's masque in honour of Mendoza. The gentlemen are quarrelsome and critical of their fellows, and the ladies sum up the men as potential lovers. The violence of this tiny scene, and its desperate over-insistence upon pleasure and enjoyment - "The music! more lights, revelling, scaffolds, do you hear?" (V.iv.7-8) - provides a distorted image of the audience in the theatre. The scene has the function of an induction to the masque, mirroring in exaggerated form the demands of the audience and their interest in the external trappings of dramatic performance. By its tiny violences and the manic quality of the demands for entertainment we are called upon to reconsider our own position as audience and even distanced from our function as observers and thus prepared for the ending of that function. Webster's induction to The Malcontent does more than simply add to Marston's play a modish discussion of the politics of the theatrical companies: it also adds a symmetry to the play's treatment of its audience. The play opens with a satiric presentation of the audience, and so does the final scene, which is a microcosm of the play itself: like the play it opens with an image of the audience and moves from fiction to fact. This last scene steps back into its own past, disrupting temporarily the clear flow of the last act from fiction to fact by preparing the way for another fictional performance: this final masque, however, is ironically to be an important step toward the dissipation of fiction and the ending of the play.

Functioning as a kind of anti-masque, presenting dangers

to married chastity and to political stability, is Mendoza's wooing of Altogront's duchess Maria. She refuses to accept Mendoza's reductive definitions of marriage and of love - "Marriage is merely nature's policy" (V.iv.38), "reason should love control" (V.iv.58), and she opposes them with her own view of marriage as the union of souls (ls 49-51) and of love as a powerful spiritual force (l.60). Finally her constancy defeats Mendoza and he orders her to be imprisoned, creating the improbable fiction that she has poisoned the hermit. Maria faces this sentence cheerfully, determining to "Revel and dance" (l.78) in celebration of her own chaste death. This moment of ambiguous festivity, however, is shattered by the entrance of Aurelia "in mourning habit" (V.iv. 79 SD): to Maria's joyful acceptance of an innocent death she opposes an oppressive sense of sin, "calamity" (l.86) and "misery" (l.87). The play contrasts a satiric vision of the select audience, self-indulgent and determined on entertainment, with the convincing suffering of Maria and Aurelia, who disturb the play's firm satiric control with suggestions of tragedy. However the tensions and pain in this anti-masque are almost immediately to be dissipated in the masque and its return to harmony.

As the anti-masque ends Mercury, who "presents the masque" (l.101) enters. The introduction of Mercury into the masque, conventional as it is, is on one level a part of the play's ironic range of heroic and romantic references. Throughout the play its characters compare or contrast their own lives with those of characters from myth and romance. The effect is double: not only do the characters in the play fail miserably to measure up to the heroic past, but the heroes in this past are themselves diminished, as their deeds are set in a new anti-heroic context of

exaggerated sexuality and cuckoldry. This undermining of the heroic past prepares us as audience to accept the play's rather tentative ending. Any grand romantic gesture has been discredited in advance by the texture of the play, and Altofront's quiet recapture of power alone carries real conviction. The play names and deflates its heroes, "Lady Guenever ... Sir Lancelot" (1.iii.46), "Prince Arthur" (1V.v.56), "Rosicleer, or Donzel del Phoebos" (V.ii.15), "Griffon" (V.i.74), "Phaeton" (1.v.39), "Jason" (11.ii.15), "Hercules" (11.v.8, 1V.v.57,93), "Ulysses ... Penelope" (111.ii.46-7). Especially important are references to the Trojan War, "Egistus ... Orestes" (1.v.7,13), "Agamemnon, Menelaus" (11.iii.9, 1V.v.55), Priam (11.v.127). Webster borrows this satirical use of the Trojan War for his induction where Sly's ridiculous suggestion about the Greeks having eaten garlic in the Trojan horse predicts the anti-heroic play to come⁸. The use of these ironically heroic references throughout the play, then, acts as a focus for the tragicomic double vision, prepares the audience for the unheroic ending of the play, and contrasts the play with a high romantic past.

However the appearance of Mercury in the masque does more than complete the play's ironically heroic context. In ordering the masque Mendoza himself had suggested the motif of "some brave spirits of the Genoan dukes .../Led in by Mercury" (V.iii.60-2). Celso's masque, however, interprets this conventional iconography in a surprisingly literal manner. Mercury introduces himself as the "god of ghosts" (V.iv.91) and presents some of these "ghosts", "Malevole, Pietro, Ferneze and Celso in white robes, with duke's crowns ..." (V.iv.101 SD). Of the masquers, all but Celso are believed by the people of the play to be dead: Malevole and Pietro personate the brave spirits of the Genoan dukes in an unexpectedly

precise way. Northrop Frye⁹ has suggested that the passage through death to rebirth is an image central to comedy, and The Malcontent includes this comic image in its conclusion. The masque is placed in the context of conventional iconography and metaphor which suddenly prove to have a solidly literal as well as a conventionally metaphorical application. The ambiguity of the masque, a fiction and not a fiction, suggests the ambiguous nature of dramatic representation in general, and the discovery that what seemed to be fiction is turning into fact prepares us for the banishment of fiction as the play ends. Metaphor and literal truth blur for a moment before they finally separate, and the comic irony of the "ghosts" who prove to be what they are acting prepares for the quiet joy and reconciliation of the ending of the play.

The masquers then "take out" members of the audience on stage: the stage audience, and through them the audience in the pit, are thus intimately involved in this shifting fiction. Malevole takes out Maria and "dance(s) with death" (V.iv.105): the usual ironic connotations of the included masque are inverted so that the expression of harmony, although it seems temporarily associated with "death", actually does lead to final reconciliation. These dances which follow the masque contain a rich confusion of emotional tones. Maria sees it as a kind of dance of death but she accepts it nonetheless with "mirth" (106). Aurelia, still "griev'd" (116) and in "misery" (114), agrees to dance with the "sad" (l.120) Pietro. This moment of convincing pathos, however, is disrupted by Ferneze's attempt to seduce Beancha, "traps to catch polecats" (V.lv.135).

The final scene of the play, then, includes the full

mechanism of a masque, the anti-masque, the presentation of the masquers, and the dances. However the masque is extended from its fictional framework into the life of the play itself, as Malevole and Pietro unmask and Mendoza is surrounded and captured without a fight. The masque has no clear ending, no final concluding speeches as the masquers depart and the elaborate fiction collapses: the primary and secondary fictions coalesce, so that a double discarding of fiction is used to explain to the audience what happens as a play ends. This final discarding of fiction is complex and far-reaching: Malevole unmask, but even the Malevole identity is simply a disguise. The convolution of disguise within disguise, the shock by which the metaphorical suddenly becomes the literal, utterly bewilders Mendoza:-

What strange delusions mock
Our senses, do I dream? or have I dreamt
This two day's space?

(V.iv.148-50)

Reality and fiction again seem confused, for the last time before the end of the play finally separates the two. Mendoza is seized and insulted, though finally granted his life by Altofront's brusque compassion. Altofront moralises on the other members of the court and generalises about "accidents of state" (168), the relation of king and subject and the duties of a king, and Mendoza is kicked out. The tragicomic ending is complete, its reconciliation troubled hardly at all by the ejection of Mendoza and only slightly more by Altofront's sombre and unillusioned theorising.

This last scene moves inexorably from the metaphorical to the literal mode. The iconography of the masque is revealed as having a precisely and unexpectedly literal significance, and fiction begins to be used so cursorily as to draw attention to its deceptive nature: Mendoza's fiction of Maria's guilt deceives

no-one. Finally the whole fictional framework collapses into "delusions" and "a dream", as Altofront casts off the layers of disguise he is wearing. Finally Malevole expounds one of the fundamental problems of theatrical experience in moral terms: "th'inconstant people" (174) are taken in by "outward shows" (176), by those of actors no less than by those of kings. The play prepares to cast off "outward shows". Any kind of fiction suddenly appears as lying and calculated: Bilioso's Falstaffian claim that he had seen through Altofront's disguise all along deceives nobody. Fictions, Altofront's disguises, the masque, and the play itself are, firmly but perhaps a little regretfully, put aside. Suddenly the highly-charged story of integrity and corruption has become simply a few men standing aimlessly on a stage, and Altofront, who has shed the fictional identities of masquer and malcontent sheds that last fictional identity and is left simply as an actor: "The rest of idle actors idly part" (V.iv.194). The last act of The Malcontent reaches its happy ending of reconciliation, reunion and the expulsion of evil, but its quiet and confident joy is slightly subdued by the play's growing distrust of its own fictional nature.

The Malcontent, then, passes through the comic images of rebirth, the reunion of the lovers, the boisterously undignified banishing of the villain, and the return to right rule. The comic ending, however, is subdued by Altofront's moralising, and by the return of the play to the actors behind the fiction. The play interprets the tragicomic happy ending as the explicit sloughing off of all fictions, even the framework of the play, and by reconciling Altofront's multiple identities and the play's clashing tones, satire and pathos, danger and slapstick comedy. The last

scene of the play minimises the danger of "negation" courted in Fletcherian tragicomedy by the central use of surprise, and the abrupt re-evaluation which this necessitates. It deliberately, however, sets out to negate its own fictional nature, so that as well as a happy ending, and the return from disguise to truth in the terms of the play, we have a thoughtful evaluation of fiction in all its aspects, as disguise, as pageantry, and finally as the play itself. The audience in the theatre is led out of the play by the gradual shedding of fictions, which begins with the intrusion of the literal mode into the masque and Burbage's sloughing off one after another of his interlocking fictional identities and which ends with the return of the play from an organised and convincing fiction to the casual placing of men on a stage. The play ends by defining not its generic nature - as I have suggested, Marston is not particularly interested in conventional genre-definitions - but its general nature as fiction. Its thoughtful movement from the metaphorical to the literal and its rejection of fiction leaves the play, and the audience, on a subdued note. Marston seems to have calculated this subdued, detached ending: the epilogue suggests that the audience met the ending with "modest silence" and "heedy stillness" (1.1). The play on the whole is critically interested in its audience, who are reflected not only in the induction but also in the preliminaries to the masque. For most of its length the play refuses to acknowledge that, either in time or space, there is any absolute distinction between the world of the audience and that of the play: the induction presents members of the audience on the stage, and at the beginning of the second act some of the action takes place outside the framework of the play itself, "whilst the Act is playing" (11.i. initial SD). No part of the space of the theatre

or of the time of the play is devoted only to acting or only to observing, for the two interpenetrate and there seems to be no absolute distinction between the two. The final scene of the play, however, has to abandon fiction and to recognise that as the play ends audience and actors must separate: "You that way: we this way"¹⁰.

Negation and surprise: the tragicomic ending of *A King and No King*.

The Malcontent moves clearly from discord to harmony, from the exploitation of fiction to its abandonment. In A King and No King the movement is perhaps more complex. The play opens with the re-establishment of peace and order with "jests" (1.i.9) and the promise of festivity and with "joys at full" (11.ii.76), and moves through pain, passion, and the danger of "tragedy" (V.iv.11) until the final separation of fact and fiction brings unexpected joy and the happy ending. Where The Malcontent uses conventional metaphors of ending, the masque and the formal discarding of disguise, A King deals more literally and directly with what happens as a play ends. It prefers not to reveal to its audience the solution of the dramatic problem which it poses until the last moment, and its central use of a surprising reversal, the discovery that Arbaces and Panthea are not brother and sister, is an acceptance in extreme form of the necessary irony of the happy ending¹¹. The author of The Malcontent lets the audience share the facts behind the disguises from the very beginning of the play, so that we are allowed to share the point of vantage of the author and of the central character, whose secure and imaginative control reflects the author's own: the audience watches, and in part shares, the activity of the playwright. In A King we

rather share the bewilderment and the illusions of the unenlightened actors: the audience, as is usual in Fletcher's tragicomedies, has the status of an actor, manipulated by the omniscient dramatist.

A King and No King, like The Malcontent, expresses itself in a series of tragicomic discords: ironic repetitions, juxtapositions and antithesis shape the play. These discords are given especially telling form in the character of Arbaces himself, "vainglorious and humble, and angry and patient, and merry and dull, and joyful and sorrowful, in extremities, in an hour" (1.i.84-6). He sees himself alternately as a god (eg 1.i.140), as a Taburlainean hero (eg 111.i.325) and as a beast (1V.iv.65). Not only, however, is his character divided within itself: it is also fragmented on stage into other characters. Mardonius acts as choral commentator and also objectifies Arbaces' nobler qualities. Bessus' cowardice, his insensitive egotism and boastfulness and his moral obtuseness form a grotesque parody of the dark side of Arbaces' nature. Bessus, however, is only the most obvious of those characters who embody Arbaces' vices. In 11.i, in a comic scene in which the crowd of citizens undermine the king's heroic pretensions, the servant Philip with his touchy readiness to quarrel provides yet another deflating comment on the king.

As the play progresses in a series of discords, it also juxtaposes tragedy and comedy in its genre definitions. The play begins with "jests" (1.i.9), and later Mardonius' deflating commentary on Arbaces' hyperbole suggests tragicomedy's critical view of tragedy. The middle part of the play presents a series of clashing definitions of tone: Spaconia's "sad words" throw into relief the "joys" of Panthea (11.i.242-3), and rather than "laugh" at her pain Panthea is willing to "weep" (11.i.278). This mixed

tone is sustained throughout the play. Comedy appears as a kind of human norm from which the passion and hyperbole of the potentially tragic main plot appears as a grotesque aberration. Comedy, the "jest" that "men are but men" (V.iii.84,83) saves Bessus from a beating, and early in the play Arbaces is quick to shelter behind comedy from his anger and passion, as he determined to be "merry" (1.i.397) with his confidant Mardonius. The play, then, consciously juxtaposes tones and admits its mixed nature, although throughout it suggests a hostile or at least astringent view of tragedy and regards comedy as a norm and as a shelter from the dangers of an uncertain world.

The last scene of A King shows Arbaces "resolved" (V.iv.1) to face sin and damnation to consummate his love for Panthea. He sums up in detail what seems an unavoidable tragic ending, his murder of Gobrius, the incestuous rape of Panthea and finally suicide, as he had previously foretold this ending to Panthea (1V. iv.99-101). This view of an alternative ending is suggested at some length and with some conviction. It is picked up by Mardonius, throughout the play the voice of moderation and sanity, who enters briefly, aware that some "tragedy" is about to happen (V.iv.11). Until this point in the play Mardonius has stood in a special relationship with the audience, guiding our responses to Arbaces' behaviour: here he knows just as much as we know, standing for our own puzzlement and fears of imminent catastrophe. His dismissal by Arbaces represents a holding at arm's length of the audience as a preliminary to the revelation, and also a change in the status of the audience. Earlier in the play we were represented by a choral character on the periphery of the action: from this point on we are to be represented by the central characters Panthea and Arbaces.

The first movement of the final scene, then presents an almost convincing definition of the play as tragedy, and dismisses one delegate of the audience so that our relationship with the play's central characters becomes closer and more direct. The second movement presents the slow, detailed and painstaking discarding of fiction, as Gobrius and Arane produce evidence that Arbaces is not of royal blood. Arbaces recognises that his love for Panthea had been stage-managed by Gobrius, "a curious way of torturing" (V.iv.82). Gobrius, however, in a characteristically tragicomic insistence on the motives that lie behind action, determines that the king will "know your sins before you do 'em" (V.iv.116). As the truth is revealed blow after blow is struck at Arbaces' tragic perception of the situation. The play in a series of steps creates new fictions - the tragic ending which does not take place, Arbaces' guess that he is a bastard - but it finally puts aside fiction in its own terms in the surprising revelation about Arbaces' birth. Now for the first time the audience is allowed to watch the unfolding of the plot and of fact and fiction from the author's point of vantage, as the new facts are repeated to the other members of the court.

After a sharp series of questions and answers, Gobrius begins a lengthy account of Arbaces' real parentage, punctuated only by short questions and remarks. The mode of the play seems to be changing from that we expect of a dramatic representation to what we expect from a written fiction, from physical action of an extreme and violent kind to charged dialogue and then to simple narrative. The movement away from the dramatic mode towards the narrative predicts the return from fiction to fact, from metaphorical to literal, as the play ends. The play has often been accused of breaking arbitrarily what seems to be the logic of the drama by

refusing the tragic ending, but this questioning of the dramatic logic is calculated. By refusing the characteristic logic of fiction the play draws our attention directly to its fictional nature. The shattering of the logic of tragedy, and the dissipation of the dramatic mode as Gobrius tells his story, mirror the end of fiction and the end of the play.

Some recent critics have felt that this final surprise and its disruption of our understanding of the logic of the play is in some sense an illegitimate effect, providing the fantasy of the gratification of incest suddenly miraculously set free from moral sanctions¹². This, however, seems a greatly simplified view of what happens in the play. The fantasy of incest may give the play its uneasy edge, but the play comes to deal with fantasy in a dry and objective way. The final scene insists that the situation was not what we thought. If we hoped for the gratification of fantasies of unlawful love we shall be disappointed: the play turns out to be about a perfectly respectable relationship. Like Marston's The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image, though less directly, the play finally turns on its audience and we are implicated in its fantasies.

Not only is surprise the essence of popular narrative and exciting and stimulating to watch: the final resolution seems, with the wisdom of hindsight, well prepared for, so that the play includes the interest of a detective story, the challenge to the audience to rebuild the structure of fact from the clues which the play scatters. Even the play's title, like that of Jonson's Epicoene or of Ford's The Fancies Chaste and Noble, provides a large clue to the mechanism of the play's denouement. Besides, Act 11 scene 1 gives important information about the revelation to come, even down to the details. We learn that there is a secret surrounding Arbaces' birth which

Gobrius and Arane share, that Gobrius considers Arbaces "mine own" (11.i.58), and that the birth of Arane's younger child threatened to reveal the "disgrace" (11.i.61-2) surrounding the king's birth. Even Arane's scornful exclamation "The king?" (11.i.53) suggests that the secret strikes at the root of Arbaces' claim to kingship. The ending of the play, then, does not simply impose a clever double-take without roots in the play. The final surprise is inherent in the play from Arbaces' first entrance and the first discussion of the discordant extremes in his character, although the very speed of the revelation and its complete undermining of the tragic emotions glances ironically at the audience and ridicules us for our slowness of perception.

Apart from the detective story provision of clues, the play also more subtly prepares us to take seriously the happy ending. A King is full of tiny included anecdotes which describe in microcosm the process of the play and its happy issue. Panthea sees her reconciliation with Arbaces in the tragicomic image of "mercy at the block" (111.i.300), Gobrius envisages the king's virtue shooting again "Into a thousand glories" (1V.i.24). Other images too, like that of the king who presents his kingdom to a beggar, also suggest the subject, and the issue, of the play. Again, the first scene of the play opens with Bessus, a satiric version of Arbaces himself, discussing his own courage and his saving the day, "Bessus' Desperate Redemption" (1.i.52). Mardonius, though, points out that this military victory was the result of a grotesque mistake: Bessus was really trying to run away. The final scene ends on a parallel and a redefinition by presenting Arbaces' "Desperate Redemption" from violence and sin, a salvation which seems the result of an accident, another ironic example of the

divergence between will and achievement. The happy ending of the play itself, then, is mirrored in details and in images from the very beginning.

Nonetheless it would be unwise to underestimate the effect of the surprising revelation of Arbaces' real ancestry. This single piece of information produces a profound modification of our viewpoint. For the first time the audience is allowed to watch the unfolding of fact and fiction from the author's point of vantage. The surprising revelation, indeed, is clearly used to control the audience's relationship to the play. Throughout the play Arbaces has been the central actor, a figure half heroic and half absurd, whose moral anguish shapes the play but who is held at a distance from the audience by the constant undermining of his character by deflating commentary or over-extravagant praise. Gobrius for the first four acts has been a shadowy figure on the edges of the action, watching critically and even stage-managing the events which take the centre of the stage. In this final scene their prominence, and their commitment to action, is reversed. Gobrius and Arane relate the complicated story and the king listens, "as still as night" (V.iv.201).

The central surprise, then, does not only force us to re-evaluate the whole of the preceding action, but it also inverts the role of actor and audience and calls upon us to reconsider our own position in the process of enactment. As the central actor Arbaces begins to assume our own function, the audience is suddenly given central place on stage: the surprising revelation of fact also includes a surprising new relationship with Arbaces, less detached and critical than earlier in the play, and a surprising new interest in presenting prominently the audience and its activity.

This reversal draws our attention to the play's fictional nature and the mechanism of enactment. Arbaces' final return to his function as actor and his abandonment of his role as representative of the audience prepares the audience in the theatre for the ending of their function as observers. The play's movement from fiction to fact is almost completed. Finally Panthea, who does not understand the change in facts but who responds sympathetically to the joys of Arbaces, enters: she too falls into the role of audience, accepting her own place in the reforming comic ending, and watching silently as Arbaces rejoices. The scene offers two mirror-images of the audience as enlightened observers and the audience as emotionally-involved participants. After a play which has seemed not to present its audience directly with images of itself and which has seemed to hold us at arm's length from its events by the use of tragicomic discords, the audience is forced into the centre of the stage and is allowed to watch the two aspects, intellectual and emotional, of its own activity, before finally being dismissed as the play ends.

The play's central surprise, then, confuses actors and audience and suggests that the audience is intimately, and centrally, involved in the events on stage. Fiction has been banished in a single sweeping movement, and the rest of the play is given over to explanation and celebration. In the earlier part of the play fiction has appeared to be threatening: Arane, for instance, curses her "over-curious brain" (11.i.60) which devised the fiction of Arbaces' royal birth. When we most sympathise with Arbaces he is most clearly detached from fiction: Panthea insists that his letters have "no art" but are the outpourings of "hearty nature" (11.i.206,208). Arbaces, horrified by his love for Panthea, tries

to create the fiction that they are not related, a fiction which strikes at Panthea's sense of identity and which leads Mardonius to fear for the king's sanity. Bessus on the other hand immediately accepts the fiction - "she's nothing like you" (111.i. 175). Ironically in this final scene it is Bessus and fiction which are proved right, as he eagerly points out (V.iv.294-5). The final scene redefines fiction, so that it appears redemptive as well as threatening: fiction and fact are blurred before their final separation as the play ends. The audience for once is placed in a superior position, with an understanding of fiction equal to that of Arbaces and greater than that of Panthea and the lords. Arbaces suggests that his own journey through fiction has given him a new understanding of the difference between fiction and fact, and a new mastery of both. As Lygones reveals that Spaconia is his daughter, Arbaces agrees: - "She is so: I could now tell anything/ I never heard ..." (V.iv.311-12). Declaring himself the master rather than the slave of fiction, Arbaces goes on to practise his new-found "art" in a hyperbolic vision of a festive procession - "We shall have the kingdom/Sold utterly and put into a toy/which she (Spaconia) shall wear about her carelessly/Somewhere or other" (V.iv.323-6). The play, then, separates fact from fiction in its own terms as a prelude to their separation as the play ends. Fiction no longer seems threatening, and the joyful response of the audience and the celebration of fiction are reflected in the reactions of Arbaces and Panthea.

Finally when the past has been explained and reinterpreted, the future is prepared for. The play finally rejects the possibility of tragedy as Tigranes refuses to take "revenge" (V.iv. 339), and the play's contrasting emotional tones are finally

synthesised in the paradoxical nature of Arbaces' joy at the discovery that he is "no king" (V.iv.353). The tragicomic ending with its reunion and reconciliation and the banishing of fiction, is complete.

The ending of A King and No King, then, mediates for the audience between the world and the play in several ways. The play attempts to define its genre as "tragedy" in some detail before the definition of tragicomedy is resumed. Fiction is gradually replaced by fact, the metaphorical by the literal. While The Malcontent finally comes to distrust fiction altogether, A King ends with a joyful celebration of the power of fiction which has produced the happy ending. Again, the surprise which is central to the last act disrupts not only our assumptions about the play but also some of the dividing lines between actors and audience, as Arbaces and Panthea both appear as delegates of the audience. Arbaces' role as audience representative is temporary and he ends the play with action and control. Panthea on the other hand ends the play as spectator as well as participant in a reversal which she only partially understands: the faculty of the audience is seen as continuing into the very end of the play.

As I have suggested, another way in which the ending mediates for the audience between the world and the play is by its critical treatment of words, its discussion of its own medium of expression. M.C. Bradbrook considers that in the Beaumont and Fletcher plays, "there is no verbal framework of any kind" and that their plays show "the decay of the linguistic patterns" of the earlier plays¹³. It is true that Fletcher rarely uses sustained imagery in the Shakesperian manner. Nonetheless, as I have suggested¹⁴, the play is interested in language: indeed the very

words "king" and "word" are repeated so often and so significantly as to achieve the status of iterative imagery. The play's "verbal framework" seems to be formed by the discussion of ways in which language modifies experience. Its characters are constantly judged by the way in which they use language: both Bessus and Arbaces, for example, are guilty of bragging, of creating an unbridgeable gap between action and language (eg l.i.119,171: l.i.51-5). In the early part of the play Arbaces sees no effective difference between deeds and words. When Mardonius takes him to task for the extravagance of his boasts he insists that his "deeds" themselves would "make modest" his "words" (l.i.349-50). He uses language as if it were action: he claims for himself the status of a "god" (l.i.140) and, god-like, he attempts to create and destroy by his words alone. His uncreating word threatens to destroy Panthea's name and her sense of who she is and leaves her "a lost thing" (ll.i.221). However our faith, and Arbaces', in the concrete force of his words is shaken as the play progresses. The chorus of citizens ludicrously reduces Arbaces' vision of himself as a victorious hero blessing them with peace to that of a shopkeeper returning from the country with "peas for ... our money" (ll.ii.149-50). This pun undermines not only Arbaces' achievement but also our uncritical faith in his use of words. Arbaces too comes to see words as hopelessly untrustworthy. As he seeks a way to make Panthea understand him "by signs", without speaking "a word" (ll.iii.49-51), it seems that language has suddenly become inadequate to express and control the extremes of his own pain and desire. Finally, in a grotesque parody of his sense that language has a quasi-divine creative and destructive force, he feels that his love for Panthea is defeated not by her unwillingness or by morality, but "only by words", "mere sounds",

"merely voice" (IV.iv.118,113,126)¹⁵.

In the final scene of the play words begin with this same surprising force. "The very reverence of the name" father prevents Arbaces striking Gobrius (V.iv.121), Arane is outraged that the king should treat Panthea so savagely and yet "call her sister" (V.iv.139). However at the same time words are returning to something like the uncharged status they have outside the play. Arane insists that the king's hyperboles are useless - "You spend your words in vain" (V.iv.176). Finally Arbaces apologises to his father for his "idle and unreverent words" (V.iv.289). As the play returns the audience from the fictional milieu to their place in the theatre it also returns us from the tragicomic world where words grotesquely distort and create action, to our own world, where they often prove inadequate.

The play's happy ending is the final sign of the creative power of words. The play repeats the word "king" until it attains a kind of mystic significance. The last scene parodies this in the way Panthea is finally reintroduced as "queen" (V.iv.269,349), and in the way in which the word "queen", with its built-in pun, brings about Spaconia's happy ending too (V.ii.62). Arbaces' happy ending comes as the result of a verbal redefinition, as he learns the true story of his birth. Bessus' happy ending parodies this: in his quarrel with Bacurius he redefines his own nature - "Shall Bessus the valiant maintain what Bessus the coward did?" (III.ii.120)¹⁶.

The play, then, reaches its happy ending, abandoning the threat posed by fiction and instead celebrating it, returning us from a rarefied world of unlawful passion where words grotesquely rear up as barriers or destroy ties of kinship. The play's

central surprise is the equivalent of a dramatised pun, forcing us to re-evaluate the whole of the preceding action and to react both to the situation as it was and as it was imagined to be, until at last fiction is dissipated. It forms a kind of parallel to the grotesque peace/peas pun which compels us to rejudge Arbaces' achievement and his attitude to language. One of Fletcher's most important achievements seems to me to be the use of unreal situations to extend the emotional range of the plays: these situations are used both to generate convincing emotion and to create a comic disturbance of the play's tragic possibilities by the revelation of their unreality. The audience is led out of the play by the revelation of this comic context, by the play's redefinition of its own genre by the use of surprise which demands a re-evaluation of action and of the roles of actor and audience, by the dissipation and the celebration of fiction, and finally by the return of words to their normal undramatic force and function. Although Fletcher uses the formal play within the play or the formal discarding of disguise as images of ending, he obtains much the same results indirectly: his clear use of the audience as central character in the final scene, and the clear road leading the audience out of the play, provides a successful mediation between the world of the play and the world of the audience.

The audience and the tragicomic ending: conclusions

The last scene of The Malcontent and of A King and No King accept with unusual clarity and explicitness that the dramatic ending is necessarily a "negation", The Malcontent by shedding altogether its fictional form as "the rest of idle actors idly

part", A King by overturning our assumptions about the play, its morality, its use of language, and even where the dividing line comes between actors and audience. Both, however, to adopt Kermode's terminology, "transfigure" their material by means of this negation, not only by placing the fictional events in a new context, but also by leading the audience out of the play and creating a final tragicomic discord as the dissipated fiction is confronted by the return of real life. Both plays finally recognise their own fictional nature, by abandoning the dramatic framework or by criticising the concrete tragicomic use of language. The Malcontent provides more direct and conventional images, the not-quite-murderous masque, the sloughing off of a vertiginous series of disguises, and the abandonment of fiction. The play opens by presenting its audience directly and ends by presenting directly an audience for the masque, and then by turning to the audience in the theatre and describing the end of fiction. A King is less direct in its images: it follows through a similar treatment of the nature of fiction and of the audience, but it lacks Marston's critical abandonment of fiction and the actors' complete stepping out of the play. Marston's play is perhaps the more serious intellectual attempt to deal with the problems of the ending of fiction, but Fletcher's play investigates the same field of ideas, although they remain more clearly submerged in the fictional story. Both plays, despite their suggestions of tragedy, have close links with comedy, with their happy endings, although these are more clearly tinged with irony and, in the case of Marston's play, curiously subdued: nonetheless they share the comic images of reunion and reconciliation, the passage through death, and the discovery of a personal identity. Both plays, with

their tragicomic discords, their rich confusion of literal and metaphorical, their colliding genre-definitions, and their investigation of the roles of actors and of audience, are particularly successful in their mediation for the audience between the world and the play.

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At the moment I have established a background of tragicomedy, the tragicomic ending, and its critical treatment of the audience, which I shall shortly use to investigate the work of Webster. However before doing this I wish to make a short digression. I have so far omitted detailed discussion of one important playwright of the period who was interested in tragicomedy and in the nature of the dramatic ending, and who wrote tragicomedies both of a Marstonian and of a Fletcherian kind - Shakespeare. I wish to look particularly at Shakespeare's descriptions of what happens as a play ends, and through this to investigate the nature of the tragicomic happy ending.

NOTES

1. Joe Lee Davis, The Sons of Ben (Detroit 1967) p.59.
2. References to The Antipodes are from the edition of Anne Haaker (1967).
3. T.B. Tomlinson, A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy (1964) p.251.
4. Ralph Berry, The Art of John Webster (1972) p.165. And this tendency to judge tragicomedy as if it were tragedy is present even in the inclusion of The Malcontent in A.H. Gomme's collection Jacobean Tragedies (1969).
5. Clifford Leech, John Webster (1951) p.91 (cf A Cure for a Cuckold).
6. Una Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (1936) p.183, on the subject of A Cure for a Cuckold.
7. P.B. Murray, A Study of John Webster (The Hague 1969) p.214, on the subject of The Devil's Law-case.
8. Induction ls 95-7. And of the play's ironic use of allusions to Hamlet. Mendoza's praise, and then dispraise of women are obvious ironic references to Hamlet - l.v.38-40 especially parodies Hamlet 11.ii.300-309.
9. Northrop Frye, A Natural Perspective (NY 1965) pp. 83-4, where he traces the "theme of death and revival" in Much Ado, All's Well, and the romances.
10. Love's Labours Lost (V.ii.918). Richard David (1951) relegates this to a footnote as "a mere reader's comment on the play as a whole", but nonetheless it seems necessary to round off the scene, and its conviction in performance suggests its authority.
11. See above, chapter one p.27.
12. See, eg. Robert K. Turner's edition of the play (1964) p.xxv.

13. M.C. Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (Cambridge 1935) pp. 247-8.
14. See above, chapter two pp. 67-70.
15. W.B. Yeats's poem "King and No King" singles out this aspect of the play. The poet feels that a vow made by Maud had taken on a disquieting concrete force which he contrasts with "The hourly kindness, the day's common speech" (l.14) and which he compares with that of Fletcher's play.
16. Bessus' adventures with language, in fact, closely parallel those of Arbaces. Early in the play he seems to feel that he can create a military reputation simply by language. From the beginning, however, he learns to distrust language - "A plague of their eloquence; 'twill cost me many a beating" (III.ii.34-5). Still later his allies the swordsmen define their honour by verbal quibbles on "grant" and "must" (IV.iii.95-106). Finally, having like Arbaces passed through trust and distrust of language, Bessus finally, like his master, gains his happy ending in a verbal definition: "Men are but Men ..." (V.iii.83).

CHAPTER FOUR

"Too long for a play": Shakespeare's tragicomic endings.

At the end of All's Well that Ends Well, after the unravelling of the fictions of the play, the solution of the riddle "One that's dead is quick" (V.iii.297), Bertram's brief promise to love his new wife "ever, ever dearly" (V.iii.310), and the curiously tentative statement of the happy ending, "All yet seems well" (V.iii.326), the actor playing the King of France steps out of his part to speak the epilogue. He announces that he is no longer a king but "a beggar" (Epilogue 1.1), an actor, a member of a profession classed with rogues and vagabonds. He turns to the audience, making the conventional request for applause and the conventional statement of the power of the audience to bring the play to its happy ending. At the same time he suggests that as the play ends the positions of audience and actors have been reversed. Not only will the actors watch as the audience applauds, but the audience are now to return from the theatre to resume their places as actors in their own lives: "Ours be your patience then and yours our parts" (1.5).

Shakespeare's interest in the mechanics of his craft, and especially of the relationship of audience and play, permeates his work. The play within the play, the image of the play, and puns on "play", "player", "stage", "scene", "shadow" and "audience" are repeated throughout the plays¹. Many of the plays contain direct

discussion of central problems of theatrical experience. Hamlet, for instance, discusses the politics of the theatrical companies (11.ii.330-52), recommends "nature" as the final judge of the play and its performance (111.ii.20,23-4) and suggests the ambiguity of the actor's and the audience's involvement in what they know to be a fiction. What's Hecuba to them or they to Hecuba (11.ii.552)? The discussion of the War of the Theatres when "the poet and the player went to cuffs" (11.ii.351) establishes drama as a form created by conflicts and prepares for the conflict of audience and play as Claudius sees his own past acted out on the stage. As actor-playwright, Shakespeare's interest in his craft centres on problems of presentation and of ways in which the faculties of actors and playwright are not confined to the stage but escape into life outside it. He seems especially interested in the interaction of audience and actor, the nature of theatrical illusion, and what happens as the illusion ends at the end of the play: his final scenes are particularly rich in images of play, actor and audience, and in direct discussion of the nature of the fiction of the play.

Comedy with its movement from disorder to festivity, "through release to clarification"², seems particularly able to include what would seem to be disparate elements, pain, fear, doubt and frustration, without either destroying the comic framework or underestimating the seriousness of the threat posed to it.

Northrop Frye, for instance, sees comedy as the most complete dramatic form:

Tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy....
contains a potential tragedy within itself. comedy

3

It is only a step from this kind of all-inclusive comedy to the

determined juxtaposition of mixed tones in the tragicomedy of Marston and of Beaumont and Fletcher: Even As You Like It, which may seem so untroubled a play, predicts tragicomedy in its use of "counterstatements"⁴, its "synthesis of ... romance and anti-romance"⁵. This principle of contrast and juxtaposition is suggested by the play's multiplication of characters: it contains not only four pairs of lovers, two jealous brothers, two satiric commentators, and two personae for Rosalind, but even two characters called Jaques and two Oliveres. The beginning of the play juxtaposes "the golden world" (1.i.109) and the "working-day world" (1.iii.12), and throughout the play the paradigm of the "old tale" (1.ii.105) is repeatedly referred to to point out the disturbing way in which life deviates from the safe conventions of fiction⁶. Even the characteristic Shakesperean device of contrasting symbolic locations, the court and Arden, is not used simply. The relationship between the two at first seems to be that of opposites, and Arden does indeed provide an escape from some of the problems of life outside. Nonetheless some of the problems of the working-day world appear in Arden in exaggerated form. In particular life in the forest seems governed by an oppressive sense of the passage of time. Time is constantly discussed by everyone, the wastage of time involved in the holiday world (11.vii.112), the relativity of time (111.ii.290-312), the relationship of time to the lover (111.ii.294-9): Jaques' bitter vision of the seven ages of man and the passage of time (11.vii.139-66) and Touchstone's grotesque version of it in the suggestion that "from hour to hour we ripe and ripe/ And then from hour to hour we rot and rot" (11.vii.27-28), are simply extreme forms of an almost universal preoccupation. Arden is not an escape from the facts of time and death, but rather a way

of accepting them.

The play's last scene, like the play itself, synthesises "counterstatements" and suggests a complete view of life in which holiday and working-day are each important parts. Like comedy in general this final scene moves from metaphorical to literal truth, "from ^{the}artificial to ^{the}natural"⁷. In the conventional images of the masque and the discarding of disguise fiction is banished in a prediction of the ending of the play. Nonetheless the play not only banishes but also celebrates fiction, and there is a strong undercurrent in the opposite direction. While the play's fictions give place to facts, some metaphors acquire a surprising literal interpretation. Rosalind's magician uncle (V.iv.32-3), the spirit of the theatre whose home within the "circle of the forest" (V.iv.34) suggests the wooden O of the theatre, was simply a fiction invented by her as an image of the power of fiction and her own power over fiction: now he has become almost literally true in the mysterious presence of the "old religious man" (V.iv.154) who converts the wicked Duke and prepares for the happy ending.

Finally as fiction and fact, holiday and working-day, satire and romance, are all absorbed into the happy ending, the fiction of the play falls apart into its constituents. The two satirical commentators Touchstone and Jaques who seem to represent different aspects of the play's, and Rosalind's, tough scepticism about the conventions of its own fiction and who have faced each other across the play, depart in opposite directions. Touchstone, participant and performer in the love-games, goes off with his audience to a future of performing. Jaques the ex-libertine, melancholy, satirical, cynical and sentimental, has stepped into something very like central place in the final part of the scene, giving the benedictions but refusing to recognise for himself the

supremacy of the comic spirit. He seems to have moved into the centre of the stage in part because he has become a delegate of the audience, critical and out of place in the festive conclusion of the fiction, and as representative of the audience he goes off in search of something new to look at, "matter to be heard and learn'd" (V.iv.179). From a grotesque amalgam of libertine and satirist at the beginning of the play, "compact of jars" (11.vii.5), Jaques has moved to become our representative, and he ends the play in a central place, treated with the same mixture of ridicule and affection with which we might view our own ambiguous position as audience.

Finally in the epilogue, straddling fiction and real life, the actor playing Rosalind begins to put off his fictional disguise - "if I were a woman ..." (Epilogue 1.17) Rosalind stresses the distinction between the actor and his part, and finally the difference between actors and the audience on whose approval they depend. The actor, a kind of hermaphrodite, male and female, person and persona, addresses the simpler, less ambiguous life of the audience, and ushers in the ending of the fiction. Fiction and fact, presenters and audience, part as the play ends.

As You Like It, then, contains implicitly some of the structures of tragicomedy in its discords, its "counterstatements", its simultaneous confidence and scepticism. Nonetheless the play reaches a festive conclusion where fiction is celebrated as well as discarded, and where holiday and working-day recognise each other as the stuff of life. In other Shakesperean plays the approach to tragicomedy is closer. The Jaques impulse becomes more emphatic and threatening, danger is dealt with more convincingly, the counter-statements are no longer synthesised in one character but tear the play across, and fiction poses important threats to the reforming

comic society. The so-called "dark comedies", where the participants resist the tidy comic form which the plays attempt to impose, and the romances, where joy and reconciliation face mocking images of hate and futility until the very ends of the plays, all powerfully suggest the "genuine dilemma of feeling"⁸ of tragicomedy. I shall deal in this chapter with three plays where the happy ending is profoundly shaped by this dilemma, three plays which moreover seem particularly interested in describing and depicting the activity of the audience and what happens as a play ends - Love's Labours Lost, Measure for Measure and The Tempest.

Love's Labours Lost and the image of the audience

One play in particular, Love's Labours Lost, gains some of the poignancy of its bittersweet effect by its direct and indirect discussion of what happens as the play ends. Although not a tragicomedy in Fletcher's sense, the ending of the play approaches the tragicomic in a way that would certainly have been understood by the publishers of Campaspe⁹. The play itself contrasts the game-playing and wit-combats of comedy with a surprising moral earnestness directed especially by the Princess of France and Berowne against Navarre and his academe. The attempt to win "Fame" (1.i.1) seems not only a denial of the most intimate impulse but also a threat to the ordered frame of society, "a dangerous law against gentility" (1.i.127). Again the hunt, a conventional symbol for love¹⁰, becomes the framework for a surprisingly serious moral discussion of how "glory grows guilty of detested crimes" (1V.i.31). The women, who introduce the world outside the ivory tower of academe, judge their perjured lovers in terms of "deadly sin" (11.i.

104) and "detested crimes" (1V.i.31). Moreover, the perjury of the men makes it impossible for the women to distinguish between seriousness and jest in their motives. The last scene must show the escape from the perverse joys of the ivory tower, an expiation of the men's "detested crimes" (1V.i.31), and a mixed tonality in which earnestness and jest can at last be distinguished.

The last scene of the play contrasts two dramatic entertainments both of which, in their own way, go disconcertingly wrong. The masque of Russians as an expression of love is interpreted by the ladies simply as "mocking merriment" (V.ii.139), and the role-playing of the men is disrupted by the women's clear-sighted ability to distinguish truth from falsehood and by their obstinate refusal to respond to the men's metaphors. Again and again the men's hyperbole is deflated by this insistence on literal truth: Rosaline insists that men who have measured many miles must know how many inches in one mile (V.ii.188-9), Berowne asks the Princess for "one sweet word" (V.ii.230) and is given "Honey, and milk, and sugar" (V.ii.231). The women, and the audience they represent, are the ones who can distinguish the literal and the metaphorical and who have power to control the performance. At the same time this audience are themselves involved in acting out parts as the women exchange identities. The men, considering themselves as actors, face an audience who are not only resolute not to accept their fictions but who, unknown to them, are parodying their acting ability by themselves enacting fictional roles. As the epilogue to All's Well suggests, audience and actors blur and change places. Inevitably in this maze of fictions and reality it is the men who come off worse, "dry-beaten with pure scoff" (V.ii.263).

The men follow this up by reappearing in their own persons.

The king's request that the Princess should give him "audience" (V.ii.313) puns on the women's role in the dispersed entertainment. The women too have discarded their disguises and confuse the men completely by first praising and then dispraising the masque, and finally revealing that they had known the truth all along. Defeated, Berowne foreswears fiction, "speeches penned" (V.ii.402) and determines in future to use words in a simple referential sense. This facile denial of verbal artifice, though, is not enough. The ladies follow it by revealing their own enacted stratagem which has forced the men into perjuring themselves again. Their "merriment" (V.iii.461) is dashed "like a Christmas comedy" (V.ii.462). Even now that the men have given up fiction it persists in dogging them, inverting their good intentions.

As the men, and the play, prepare to give up fiction, the Pageant of the Nine Worthies appears as a last-ditch demonstration of the power and the ridiculousness of fiction. The courtiers watch the entertainment as a show worse than "the king's and his company" (V.ii.511): the implied theatrical pun admits the men's earlier concern with the acting out of fictions. The men now join the ladies as an audience for the pageant, the men boisterous and mocking, undermining its conventions and insisting upon its purely fictional nature, the women silent and sympathetic. The men's reception of the play raises some important problems of theatrical experience. The audience insist that it is they who create and control the dramatic fiction by accepting and responding to it, as the audience of ladies had previously insisted on their ability to distinguish fact and fiction. It is they who allow the actor to assume other identities - "We have given thee faces" (V.ii.614), and they willfully point out that if they refuse to respond to the

fiction it remains simply so many unconvincing words - "I Pompey am./You lie, you are not he" (V.ii.543). The scene stresses the creative power of the audience, and although the actors try to insist on their own identities - "Your servant, and Costard" (V.ii.567) - on balance it is the audience who win, insisting on the silliness and implausibility of the fiction, and drawing the attention of the audience in the theatre to the fictional nature of the whole enactment.

As the scene progresses we are travelling farther and farther from the ivory tower of academe, and even from the courtiers' conventional expressions of love. The ultimate facts of life and death have already crept into the comic scene as Katherine discloses that her sister had died of love (V.ii.14-15). Now Armado asks for respect for the dead Hector - "The sweet war-man is dead and rotten; ... when he breathed, he was a man" (V.ii.653-5). However this moment of poignancy is broken by Dumaine's obscene pun¹¹, and again by the implied pun in Costard's picking up Armado's word "surmounted" and revealing Jaquenetta's pregnancy (V.ii.662-5). The fiction hints at a juxtaposition of birth and death as Armado and Costard fight, but the danger dissolves into foolery and a parody of the romantic love relationship.

However the dissolution of fiction is not yet complete. Marcade's news of the death of the Princess's father not only interrupts the "merriment" (V.ii.705) of the pageant, but also disrupts the comic framework of the play. Death is no longer part of a classical past or an indeterminate future, but a fact of the present. This entrance of the messenger of death into the festive setting is doubly poignant because it mirrors what is to happen as the play ends. The pageant over, the demands and fears of real life

reassert themselves, and the audience, although secure in its ability to manage the dramatic fiction, must face the less accommodating material of reality which is less willing to allow itself to be shaped or controlled.

In the face of the news of death the lovers attempt to explain themselves. The comic framework is finally not sufficient, since it led the women to believe that the men's love only went as far as "pleasant jest" (V.ii.768). The breaking of the comic fabric by the entrance of death paradoxically permits the love-relationships to attain a new stability, and the lovers to come to a new understanding. This, however, is not quite enough: the men must still prove their faithfulness and their seriousness about the new relationships. The tasks imposed on the men, to live ascetically in a hermitage or to jest in a hospital, are a step away from comedy, and even an implied criticism of the exuberance of comedy. Especially in Berowne's case, the humourist must face the commitments of the flesh, and the probability is that comedy will not survive it. Rosaline's imposition of the final test of comedy also turns to a graceful compliment to the audience: "A jest's prosperity lies in the ear/ Of him that hears it, never in the tongue/Of him that makes it" (V.iii.849-51). The audience within the play has just had its own authority dashed: their control of the play is precarious, and outside the play they have no control at all. Now it is the audience outside the play who are endowed with this shaping and controlling power, though even here the play's reservations about the power of the audience moves across the footlights.

This turning to the audience in the play's most poignant moment leads into an explicit discussion of the difference between conventional comic form and the convincing untidiness of the play as

we have it. Jack hath not Jill: the comic pattern remains incomplete, and we are seeing neither "an old play" (V.ii.862) nor "a comedy" (V.ii.864). Although we are promised a happy ending, it lies somewhere in the future, and "That's too long for a play" (V.ii.866): "Contrivance fails when confronted, unexpectedly, with a superior reality"¹².

The play opened with a desperate attempt to escape "cormorant devouring Time" (1.i.4) by sacrificing the life of the body to the life of the mind. It ends by stepping back into time in its recognition of the physical facts of birth, love and death, and the seasonal songs in praise of spring and winter stress this new acceptance of time and the physical life. The last scene of the play has presented an ambiguous view of the audience, powerful within the limits of fiction but not so powerful outside them, controlling and holding together the fictions of the play and giving value to its jests, but at the same time as fragile themselves as the fictional form. Now finally, with its comic framework in shreds, the play and its audience must separate, "You that way: we this way" (V.ii.918-19). Whether or not this final line is Shakespeare's, this powerful comment on the final dissolution of the play is quite in keeping with a play so aware of the power, and the final inadequacies, of the play's fictional form and of its audience.

Love's Labours Lost, then, interprets the happy ending as a movement from fiction to reality, the destruction of the comic form, and the promise of marriage and reconciliation somewhere beyond the comic framework. The play contrasts the pretensions of the men, their role-playing and the fiction of the play itself, with "a superior reality". The comic form is finally rejected in favour of an unconventional form which can suggest the continuation of life

beyond the end of the fiction, so that the disintegration of comedy in the last moments produces a form and tone verging on the tragicomic. Above all, the play is interested in its audience, in their power and their powerlessness, and in what happens as a play ends, as the grotesque pageant of comedy is interrupted by news from the real world. The play dismisses layers of fiction until it finally rejects the comfortable comic form, and the shape of fiction itself.

"Such fantastic tricks": Measure for Measure and the image of the playwright.

Measure for Measure, for a play which uses as central images and motifs "seeming" (11.iv.150), the divergence of fiction and fact, and substitution, as Angelo takes the place of the Duke, Mariana of Isabella, or Ragozine of Claudio, makes curiously little use of direct images of theatre and acting¹³. Even the last scene, where the Duke sets up and knocks down a sequence of tiny tragicomedies, nowhere uses the direct play images so frequent in Shakespeare's comic conclusions. Nonetheless, the image of life as acting, as directing and as observing seems to be implicit in the ambiguity of the Duke's role as playwright, actor and director, in the formal scene of welcome and of trial which approximates the play within the play, and in the increase of pressure from images of substitution, and this theatrical undercurrent adds edge to the play's uncomfortable tragicomic ending.

Of the so-called "dark comedies", Measure for Measure with its interest in sexual morality and in the reality of intentions which do not issue in deeds, its avoidance of death at the last moment, and its painful scepticism about the absolutes it discusses,

seems closest to a tragicomic form as it might have been understood by Marston or Beaumont and Fletcher. Its dense background of satirical reference, the uncertain control of the manipulator Vincentio, and the ambiguity of its central characters bring it closest to Marstonian tragicomedy. The final scene with its subdued tone, its formality, and the danger posed to it by the continuation of fiction, form a rather dark image of festivity, and a conclusion which is only partially comic.

As mediator between the fiction of the play and the fact of the life of the audience, the last scene is concerned with the ripping off of disguise and the interpretation of metaphors. Nonetheless, the return to reality in the play's terms is balanced by the complex manipulation of fictions in which the Duke is involved. If Love's Labours Lost is interested in the creative and destructive power of the audience, Measure for Measure provides a parodic version of the power of the actor-playwright. The playwright controls his people and gives them situations to react in, and so does Vincentio. The playwright deals with fictions: Vincentio acts the part of the Friar, only giving it up when Lucio forcibly unmasks him, and lies to Claudio, to the Provost and to Isabella. The playwright constantly risks failure in imposing order on his creations: the Duke's plans are repeatedly disrupted, even, as when he tries to persuade Barnardine to die, disrupted in the direction of grotesque comedy. Vincentio, indeed, is in an ambiguous position: although he has been forced to take on the forms of a world of deceit the Duke must produce the comic conclusion in which false appearances are banished and must mediate for the audience between the fictional world of the play and the renewal of everyday life.

At the beginning of the scene the muted formal celebration

of the Duke's return is broken by Isabella's clamours for justice, an image of discord before the final reimposition of order. As Isabella puts her case, the language suddenly becomes charged with reminders of the past: events seem to be repeating themselves so that instead of preparing the audience for the disappearance of illusion the play plunges us back into its fiction. Isabella insists that "truth is truth/To th'end of the reckoning" (V.i.45-6), as Lucio had previously stated that "grace is grace, despite of all controversy" (1.ii.23-4). In particular there are echoes in situation and words of Angelo's period of temptation, and especially of Act 11 scene iv, where Isabella had begged for mercy for her brother as she now begs for justice on Angelo. Thus Isabella repeats the central pun on Angelo's name - "You bid me seek redemption of the devil" (V.i.29) - and insists that Angelo is a villain, "If he be less, he's nothing" (V.i.58), as previously Angelo had insisted that Isabella should accept herself as a woman - "if you be more, you're none" (11.iv.134).

As actor-manager the Duke has a particular penchant for tragicomedy, for the last-minute escape from the depths to the heights. Earlier he had concealed Claudio's safety in the hope of making Isabella "heavenly comforts of despair" (1V.iii.106), and had brought Barnardine almost to the block before dismissing him. This final scene is a network of small tragicomedies as Angelo is condemned and reprieved, Isabella is given heavenly comforts and Claudio appears alive, and Lucio too jests his way out of execution. These tragicomedies, devised and directed by Vincentio, are acted out by him, Isabella, Mariana and the Provost, although their understandings of the situation differ enormously: the Duke's own complete understanding gives a heavily ironic weight to the

convincing suffering of the other participants, suffering which could have been avoided.

Mariana's riddle on her own status and the identity of her husband (V.i.171-80, 184-7) is a powerful tragicomic image, suggesting the ambiguous state of a world where knowledge and thought, intention and act, are wrenched apart and riddling language is the only way of expressing a complex reality. We might expect the acceptance of paradox which the riddle implies to herald the end of fiction¹⁴. Instead, however, Vincentio steps back into the dark corners of ambiguity and fiction, appearing again in his Friar's habit. As Duke and Friar he identifies himself as a "looker-on" (V.i.315) in Vienna, a representative not only of the ordering power of playwright-director, but also of the critical faculty of the audience. The grave moral commentator faces Lucio the amoralist, who has throughout the play suggested important reservations about the Duke's power and his wisdom. The friar-duke, poser of tragicomedies, has attained an important half-truth in his apprehension of sin and degradation. Nonetheless he can learn invaluable lessons from Lucio's defence of the natural human appetite, his cheerful affection for Claudio and Isabella, and his Barnardine-like refusal to see death as the solution to any human problems. Angelo, who sees the death of Claudio and then his own death as the only way of imposing pattern on the chaos of experience, and the Duke, who half-heartedly plans the deaths of Barnardine and perhaps of Lucio, are subtly rebuked. The unwilling deviser of tragedies and the amateur of tragicomedy face the anarchic spirit of comedy and are changed by it.

Finally the web of fiction is broken, not by the Duke himself but by Lucio, who ruins the grave and elevated tone of the

scene the Duke has set up by forcibly removing the Friar's hood, a fine comic moment charged with menace. The Duke has little luck with his amateur tragicomedies. His first attempt to save Claudio almost leads to disaster because he simply failed to understand the intensity of Angelo's fear and guilt: now another tragicomic scene is dissipated in grotesque comedy. Lucio reacts to the appalling discovery with the self-control of comedy: Angelo immediately and without resistance accepts his own tragic apprehension of the events of the play. Angelo says nothing of importance towards the end of the scene except his two requests for death: even in the final moments he seems unwilling to surrender himself to the happy ending. Vincentio, however, is involved in posing another scene. He insists on justice on Angelo, "Measure still for Measure" (V.i.409), a demand which has a curious unreality since both the Duke and the audience know we are being called on to react to a fictional situation. This scene ought to have been the first step on the road from fiction to fact as Angelo's guilt is revealed: instead it proves to be a step backwards. Mariana suddenly becomes aware of the pervasive unreality: "I hope you will not mock me with a husband" (V.i.415). Vincentio, however, pinpoints Angelo as the source of all fiction: it was he who mocked Mariana with a husband and who is punished in the tragicomic scene of illusion and pretence.

Mariana, however, refuses to accept the scene as a tragedy and finally Isabella, strained by the confusion of fiction and reality, surrenders and begs for Angelo's life. The Duke however has not finished his dramatic scene, although when Isabella passes his demanding test of her Christian virtues and her commitment to comedy he does tone down the danger of the scene by turning to "another fault" (V.i.454), that of the Provost. The scene is now

ripe for the ending of fiction, and the Duke has Claudio brought in and completes the tragicomic scene by wholesale pardons. Even Lucio, the representative of the anarchic comic spirit, is finally pardoned in a grotesquely comic scene which parodies the tragicomedy which it follows.

The play, then, ends in the comic images of pardon, reconciliation and marriage, but they seem to be treated in a particularly ironic way. The Duke forgives the unregenerate Barnardine, the iconoclastic Lucio, the silent Angelo, and the man "as like almost to Claudio as himself" (V.i.487). ~~the in the process~~
~~time of fiction is not even named.~~ A kind of happy ending has been achieved by the release from fiction, but there continue to be discordant elements. Much of the tragicomic tension remains because of what is not said. Angelo says nothing in the latter half of the scene, besides twice asking for death, not a word to his new wife, to the woman who begs for his life or the Duke who grants it. Although he seems to accept the comic ending by the "quickenings" (V.i.493) which Vincentio claims to see in his eyes, he gives no sign of joying in it. A large and important part of this final scene is not put into words: Angelo's reprieve is not granted in words but simply arises logically from the changed situation, Claudio ~~is not named and~~ says nothing at all after his return to life. His last words in the play are a casual description of Barnardine's animal view of life and death (IV.ii.61-3), and before that a weary acceptance of death (III.i.170-1): like Angelo, he seems an only half-willing participant in the reforming comic society.

Especially striking and especially dangerous to the security of the comic ending is the silence of Isabella. She apologises to the Duke for not recognising him (V.i.383-5), she agrees that her

Christian faith consoles her for Claudio's loss (V.i.397), she pleads for Angelo's life (V.i.441-452). She has no words for Claudio for whom she has gone through so much - her last words to him in the play are "'Tis best thou diest quickly" (111.i.52) - nothing to Angelo, and, especially puzzling, no response to the Duke's repeated proposal of marriage. It is certainly true that tragicomedy can explain to the eye rather than to the ear, and Isabella can, and perhaps should, be shown on stage throwing herself into Claudio's arms. Words, which have created all the tragicomic confusions, are somehow inadequate to express the happy ending: Jocelyn Powell, for instance, suggests that words "would ... detract"¹⁵ from Isabella's joy at this emotional moment. Nonetheless the thunderous silence which surrounds the Duke on all sides compromises the comic ending and leaves it determinedly unfinished. Isabella's silence is difficult to show on stage as the result of inarticulate joy, and recent productions have showed it charged with bewilderment, resignation, resentment or even terror¹⁶. Earlier in the play the Duke as director had seen himself as free from the passions that move the people of his dramas: he is safely immune to "the dribbling dart of love" (1.iii.2). Now, however, he has learned from Claudio, Lucio and Angelo that no man can escape it. His proposal to Isabella is an acceptance of his own human frailty, that he is a fallible man and not a "complete bosom" (1.iii.3). It is also an attempt to enter the comic ending, to attain the all-inclusiveness of comedy and complete the comic symmetry of reconciliation and marriage. Isabella, however, refuses to accept it in these terms. The final comic repatterning which the Duke has calculated lacks this tidiness of pattern, even verging on parody of the completeness of the comic ending: of the four marriages that

are made in this last act only that of Claudio and Juliet is willingly accepted on both sides. In this final act, then, Vincentio's attempt to stage a comic scene results in a grotesque parody of comic festivity, troubled by unspoken pain and regret. The Duke moves to the centre of his posed scene to stand among his puppets who sink into silence. The play sloughs off its fictional form by its new distrust of language and its pressing silences. At the same time the audience is no longer called upon to feel strongly with or for these silent people, and in the growing atmosphere of disengagement it is as if the people of the play are already stepping out of their parts.

If Vincentio as "looker-on" (V.i.315) is in a minor way representative of the audience as well as of the manipulating power of the playwright-director, here in the final scene other participants in the comic ending, Claudio, Angelo, Isabella, Barnardine, the Provost, have been reduced to the silent status of an audience. In the last moments of the play audience and director return to the palace where Vincentio is to give a fuller explanation of "what's yet behind" (V.i.537). The ambiguous adverb seems to face backwards and forwards in time¹⁷: the double meaning unites past and future as the play returns to a recognition of its nature as fiction. Despite suggestions throughout the scene that Vincentio and others may represent the audience, the actors in the fiction are now entirely cut off from their audience in the theatre, people in a fictional world receding into a fictional past or an unreal future, an inescapable circle of fiction into which the audience in the theatre could not, and is not invited to, enter.

In Love's Labours Lost the play ends with a statement of the ambiguous power of the audience and with the discarding of the

conventional comic framework to replace it with the real untidiness of experience. Measure for Measure provides an astringent or even parodic view of the ambiguous power of the playwright, whose fictions are constantly being smashed by the participants in them or by their observers. The play presents a sequence of posed tragicomedies whose mixed tone is precarious, and the final scene produces an ironic view of the images of the comic ending, marriage, forgiveness and reconciliation. As is characteristic of Shakesperean comedy, the play moves from fiction to fact, from metaphor to literal truth. Nonetheless the play ends, not like Love's Labours Lost by stepping outside the fictional framework, but by pointing out the threat posed by fictions in real life and by retreating from the audience into fictional past or future. The play presents an ironically comic conclusion shaped by significant silences, and the audience in the theatre are prompted in their reactions by the presentation of an audience on stage, so that the danger of tragedy and a grotesque ironic vision of comedy blend into a convincingly untidy and tentative account of human fallibility.

The Tempest and the image of the play.

If Love's Labours Lost gains some of its power from its description of what happens as a play ends and its breaking up of the comic form, and Measure for Measure by its ironic depiction of the attempt to impose the conventional patterns of fiction on life, The Tempest is among other things a discussion of the nature of ending - of a play, of a career, of a life - and an attempt to create a tragicomic form in which the ending will have a particular importance as negation and as transfiguration. It presents, in effect, the end of a story, the fifth act of a larger play whose

outlines are suggested in Prospero's tale to Miranda in Act 1. The play takes the material of the last acts of Pericles or of The Winter's Tale, separation and reconciliation and the passage of time, and expands it over five acts. The play has the lucidity and smoothness of imagery of Shakesperian fifth acts and their relative lack of direct character description. In the second act of the play Antonio describes the planned murder of Alonso as an "act/Whereof the past is prologue" (1.1.243-4). The Tempest is the conclusion to the prologue of the past, and the past has a special importance in the play: the play is interested in the conclusion of a story and in the nature of conclusions in general.

Where other Shakesperian comedies implicitly deal with the changing relationship of audience and play, The Tempest explicitly takes this as an important theme. Prospero throughout the play occupies the position of director and designer, who has planned and managed the tragicomedy of tempest and wreck and the romantic comedy of Ferdinand's falling in love with Miranda. While Vincentio seemed to parody the dramatist's power and control, Prospero represents the most the playwright can achieve - pattern, self-knowledge, the happy ending - but he remains mocked by the intransigence of his material, by the resolute refusal of Antonio to join the comic reshaping, and by the shadow cast by the "thing of darkness" (V.1.275) Caliban. Throughout the play "Art" acquires a rich series of double-meanings, as Prospero's magic power and the faculty of dramatist and actor. The play is thronged by other versions of the faculties of director, actor and audience. Ariel and his "quality" (1.1.193) - itself a semi-technical term for the acting profession - are ready to step into any fiction, appearing in the masque of goddesses, as harpy, sea-nymph, dogs, or grotesque

islanders. The darker side of the directing and acting ability is reflected in Antonio and Caliban, both of whom are willing to set up and participate in scenes of murder. Other characters present the audience with images of themselves: Miranda listening to Prospero's description of the past, or suffering with those she sees suffer, suggests the empathic susceptibility of the audience. Ferdinand and Miranda watch the masque of goddesses, Alonso and the lords watch the illusions of Ariel. Again, Sebastian and Antonio, sullenly silent or making bitterly reductive jokes, are the dark side of the audience whose "counterperformances"¹⁸ jeopardise the secure comic control. The play is shaped by its description and evaluation of the roles of actor, audience and playwright, and its sense of the ambiguous positions of playwright-director and of observers.

As The Tempest seems in a particularly direct way to be a description of the fictional ending, the sense of an ending pervades the whole of the last two acts. Act IV, indeed, has much in common with the final scenes of other Shakesperean comedies and romances. The masque of goddesses with its promise of triumph over time, and Prospero's resonant acceptance of the dissolution of fiction and of life, leaving not a rack behind, might be expected to occur in a fifth act, forming a mediation for the audience between the world and the play. The melting of the illusion of the masque, the prediction of the end of the play and of the cosmic fiction of human life, however, are again repeated in Act V. It is as if the play is extended beyond its conventional conclusion. The fiction of the play has a wonderful resilience and strength which can survive even its apparent ending.

When Prospero first appears in Act V, he has regained the

control of himself which slipped momentarily as the ending of the masque of goddesses confronted him with the pressure of real life, his danger from Caliban and the drunkards. Here in Act V he prepares to stage the end of the play. Through Ariel he has learned something of his own nature, that he is no "god of power" (1.ii.10) but of the same world as his prisoners, "one of their kind" (V.i.23) subject to passion in the same way. In the early part of the play Prospero has tended to control emotion tightly, to tone down the strong empathic emotion of Miranda, for instance. In the last two acts, however, emotion floods back into the dry pools of the play. Earlier Prospero had only dissembled anger with Ferdinand, felt irritation with Ariel and Caliban, or a deep but not fully articulated tenderness for Miranda. This increase in the pressure of emotion signals the ending of fiction and prepares for the festive conclusion and for the moment when, in the epilogue, the fiction and its emotions are put aside.

Throughout the last scene Prospero is concerned, as he is throughout the play, in creating and ordering scenes illustrating the defeat of vice and the triumph of virtue. Now, charming his prisoners into his magic circle, he comments on the characters of each, forgiving all, even, if a little grudgingly, his "most wicked" brother (V.i.130), and entering again into the human community. Prospero organises the fiction, revealing as an emblem of order the lovers playing chess, a world in which falsehood exists only in the context of the game and is tenderly accepted by Miranda. Again the boundaries of fact and fiction waver as Alonso takes the scene for "a vision" (V.i.176). And, for an instant, the reforming comic society is expanded, almost able to reconcile its discordant elements, as Sebastian of all people recognises the happy ending as

a "most high miracle" (V.i.177), and Miranda and Ferdinand enter the "brave new world" (V.i.183) which only the worldly-wise Prospero qualifies - "'Tis new to thee" (V.i.184). Only Antonio resolutely himself alone, excludes himself from the reshaping society and remains almost silent throughout the act, the intractable, unsympathetic member of the audience who cannot enter the golden world. However, despite this silent mocking presence, the eternal negative, "Creation's O" ¹⁹, the comic conclusion seems to have been reached. Prospero insists that the past, which has held a special status throughout the play, is no longer real or important, "a heaviness that's gone" (V.i.200) which no longer needs to be felt or remembered. He turns his back on the past and prepares for the future, however sombre it might be, proclaiming the rather subdued happy ending - "Think of each thing well ..." (V.i.251):

From this point in the play Gonzalo, Miranda and Ferdinand have no more lines, and the fiction seems to shrink into something which is happening in the mind of Prospero. The scene becomes a darkening circle about his central figure which predicts the death to which he is to dedicate every third thought, and its image, the end of the play. Cutting through these gathering shadows erupts the almost-murderous antimasque of Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano. Like the lords before them they enter in distraction, a comic form of the previous scene of threat and reconciliation. The normal hierarchies return and misrule is overthrown: Caliban recognises his "god" as a drunkard (V.i.296) and returns to Prospero determining to be "wise" and "seek for grace" (V.i.294-5), so that not even the thing of darkness, the lust and anarchy which menace the comic ending, can be completely excluded from its repatterning. Like Prospero and Alonso, Caliban learns to

distinguish fiction from fact: his wondering cry as misrule gives place to order echoes Miranda's - "These be brave spirits indeed!" (V.i.261), a sure sign of his inclusion in the comic ending.

However the return of the usual system of rule and association is not entirely benevolent. Sebastian and Antonio renew their scornful belittling banter: the wonderful show is over, and they are themselves again. Apart from them, however, the reforming society has a strong and stable core: even Caliban is adopted as a part of Prospero's own being, a part of the all-inclusive comic ending. Finally Prospero prepares to step into an ambiguous future, where Ferdinand and Miranda can complete their wedding celebrations, yet where Prospero's every third thought is to be his grave. This future, however, like the visions of the past which shape the first act, is curiously lacking in detail: Prospero as actor and fictional character exists only on his bare island, and elsewhere darkness engulfs him.

Finally the comic reconciliation with its miraculous joy and real imperfection is complete. The grotesque antimasque, which might have led into dances, masque and music, leads instead to a negation of the fiction of the play. Prospero, left alone on stage, now directly addresses the audience - "Please you, draw near" (V.i.318). This epilogue continues with the theme of the relationship of art and life, their comparable fragility and yet their ultimate separateness which Prospero explored in the speeches beginning "Our revels now are ended" (IV.i.148) and "Ye elves of hills..." (V.i.33). In the course of the epilogue Prospero ceases to be the fictional Duke of Milan only but speaks also for the actor who portrayed him and the playwright who directed all his directing. The actor, like Prospero himself, steps off the magic island and

enters again into the realm of time, so that the magician who has abandoned the "rough magic" (V.i.50) of manipulation and control, the actor without a part to play, and the playwright whose fiction is at an end all seem curiously vulnerable - "And my ending is despair ..." (Epilogue 1.15). The magic land of the play has contracted into the stage, "this bare island" (Epilogue 1.8), as the play itself has contracted into the dual figure of Prospero. It is now suggested that the audience has the same shaping power over him as Prospero had over the people of the fiction: they are even given a place in the story and are petitioned to release Prospero and the actor-playwright from the "bands" (Epilogue 1.9) of his own fiction. In a play in which freedom has been an important theme - Ariel and Caliban both long for freedom, Ferdinand wins freedom by being a slave - the inversion by which the actor-playwright-magician begs the audience to set him "free" (Epilogue 1.20) from the darkening fiction, has a special poignancy.

The comic reshaping of the play, then, is almost inclusive, despite its gathering darkness, the mocking presence of Antonio, and Prospero's sacrifice of his art and his vision of his own coming death. The very precariousness of the ending gives a greater intensity to its more than common joy. Boisterous and dangerous comedy, fear of death and of madness, and the romantic comedy of young love, are synthesised in a tragicomic form in which joy and loss are perfectly balanced. Above all, the play's explicit treatment of the dissolution of fiction and beyond it of human life, and the leading of the audience out of the play as Prospero becomes actor and the play admits its fictional nature, perform one of the most powerful mediations between audience and play that Shakespeare wrote. In a tragicomic inversion the controlling Prospero becomes

a prisoner of fiction, and the audience is called upon to release him, although behind this conventional deference to the power of the audience is the shadow of the fragility of human life as well as its mirror, the ending fiction.

Conclusions

As was inevitable for a thoughtful artist interested theoretically as well as practically in his art, Shakespeare experimented with several kinds of mixed-genre plays. King Lear, for instance, inverts Northrop Frye's belief that tragedy is incomplete comedy by ironically presenting tragedy as completed comedy: Lear and Cordelia reunited almost achieve a happy ending, but this disintegrates into tragedy. Shakespeare's tragicomic plays have a wide scope, including the clear comic surface of Lyly's tragical comedy, the close texture of satirical reference of Marston's plays, or the riddling world of Fletcherian tragicomedy. The plays develop through discords, ironic juxtaposition, contrast and repetition. The Tempest especially constantly compares unlike characters, Miranda and Caliban, Ferdinand and Caliban, and suggests similarities between apparently unlike moments; the almost-tragic scene in which Antonio urges Sebastian on to murder his brother by claiming to see a crown hanging over him (11.i.199-200), is repaired in Gonzalo's joyous vision of a "blessed crown" (V.i. 202) hanging over the young lovers and predicting their comic ending.

Jacobean tragicomedy seems to be unlike tragedy in kind, unlike comedy only in degree. The structure of comedy, that is to say, lies at its heart, and is strongly suggested, but the plays

qualify this comic ending, pass beyond it, or disrupt its fictional nature. Northrop Frye²⁰ sees the comic structure composed of a period of preparation, a period of license and the confusion of values, and finally the period of festivity itself. Shakespeare's tragicomic plays use this sequence but tilt it away from festivity. Love's Labours Lost stresses the periods of preparation and of license, and follows festivity with a darker image of a dangerous world outside comedy. Measure for Measure treats festivity very perfunctorily: disorder has been so strong and convincing as to endanger the comic world. The Tempest balances the joy and the precariousness of its festive ending, moving from comic joy to a putting aside of the whole fictional form. The plays provide ironic, or at least subdued, definitions of comedy and move forward to an acceptance of their own fictional nature. In the last moments the fiction is negated: the audience is led outside the comic convention and returned to a real life not governed by the safe rules of fiction. Love's Labours Lost and The Tempest especially clearly lead their audience out of the fiction and out of the play itself: the juxtaposition of comic convention and the untidiness of real life form a last tragicomic discord. The Marstonian synthesis of Measure for Measure ironically defines comedy and ends on a half-festive, half-sceptical acceptance of fiction. Shakespeare's tragicomic plays use the "negation" of the fictional ending to point out the supremacy of life over the fiction of the play: their broad inclusiveness of festivity and scepticism uses and predicts the ambiguous tragicomic worlds of Beaumont and Fletcher and of Webster.

NOTES

1. For Shakespeare's use of the play image see especially Anne Righter, Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play (Harmondsworth 1967). And see also Jackson Cope, The Theater and the Dream (Baltimore 1973) and J.R. Brown, Shakespeare and his Comedies (1957) pp. 91-102.
2. C.L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy (Princeton 1959) p.6.
3. Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" (English Institute Essays 1948) p.65.
4. Barber, op. cit., p.226.
5. Ralph Berry, Shakespeare's Comedies (Princeton 1972) p.175.
6. The play's plot is continually compared or contrasted with the "old tale" (1.ii.105), "Robin Hood of England" (1.i.106) and so forth. At its beginning the play, with the three brothers, irrational jealousy and love at first sight, seems like something out of an old tale. Later however an elaborate system of counterpoint is developed by which life is seen as taking on the shape of the old tale - Celia, for instance, tries to reduce Le Beau's account of the wrestling to "an old tale" (1.ii.105) - or as refusing to take it, as Touchstone's initial reaction to Arden undermines the pastoral convention. Ironically it is in the final scenes, in a last-ditch triumph of fiction before Rosalind puts off her fictional identity, life seems most amenable to the forms of fiction, as Oliver is converted and Celia falls in love with him, and in the implausible use of the deus ex machina Jaques de Boys with unlikely tale of Frederick's conversion.
7. Cyrus Hoy, The Hyacinth Room (1964) p.30.

8. J.R. Mulryne, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedy" (John Webster, Brian Morris ed., 1970) p.135.
9. In 1591 the second quarto of Lyly's Campaspe described itself as a "tragical comedy".
10. Cf. Sir Thomas Wyatt's poem, "Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind ...", for example.
11. Boyet: Loves her by the foot.
Dumaine: He may not by the yard (V.ii.658-9).
12. Righter, op. cit., p.101.
13. There are a few play images - see Righter, op. cit., p.158-61.
14. As Diana's riddle of "One that's dead is quick" does in All's Well that Ends Well (V.iii.297).
15. Jocelyn Powell, "Theatrical trompe l'oeil in Measure for Measure" (Shakespearean Comedy, eds. Bradbury and Palmer, Stratford upon Avon Studies 14, 1972) p.208.
16. In John Barton's 1970 Royal Shakespeare Company production, Isabella was left alone on stage, excluded from the comic ending. In Jonathan Miller's more recent (Old Vic 1974) production Isabella backed off stage in horror. Frank Dunlop's Young Vic production (1971), which tried to minimise these discordant elements in the last act, was compelled to give Isabella the interpolated line, "Oh brave new world/That has such people in it!" (The Tempest V.i.183-4).
17. "Behind" can certainly, as J.W. Lever points out, mean "to follow", as it does at V.i.527 (Measure for Measure 1967) and as it does at The Changeling V.iii.211. However it seems ambiguous: SOED gives "in the past" as a possible meaning for the adverb in 1526.
18. Michael Shapiro, "Audience vs. Dramatist in Jonson's Epicoene

and Other Plays of the Children's Troupes" (ELR 1974) p.405.

19. W.H. Auden, The Sea and the Mirror (Collected Longer Poems 1968) p.224.
20. Northrop Frye, A Natural Perspective (NY 1965) p.73.

CHAPTER FIVE

"My tragedy must have some idle mirth in't": John
Webster's tragedies and the language of comedy

In 1639 an unknown compiler, perhaps John Taylor the Water Poet¹, took advantage of the contemporary taste for jest books by publishing Conceits, Clinches, Flashes and Whimsies, an eclectic collection of funny stories, puns, striking conceits and epigrams and tiny satirical sketches. Whoever the compiler was, he seems to have a particular interest in plays and the theatre: one anecdote, number 194, jests about the publications of the first Shakespeare folios. Of the first five jests in the collection, all epigrams or elaborate metaphors, two seem to be derived directly from John Webster's The White Devil. The fourth jest, "Lovers oathes are like marryners prayers ..." is an accurate quotation of Flamineo's description of his uneasy relationship with Zanche, although the two similes develop in rather different ways². The fifth item, "Women are like dead bodies for surgeons to worke upon, because they tell a man his imperfections", is a fairly close remembrance of Monticelso's description of whores in the arraignment scene³. John Webster, who is known to modern audiences almost solely as the author of two great tragedies, The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, seems to have been considered by his contemporaries also as a comic writer and a wit. Gamaliel Bradford has suggested that Webster was "no mean master of comedy"⁴: this insight applies not only to Webster's early collaborative exercises

in comedy, but also to his later tragedies and tragicomedies.

Beaumont and Fletcher learned to write comedy and tragedy by first writing tragicomedies. Webster on the other hand learned to write tragicomedy by writing comedies and tragedies. His tragicomedies The Devil's Law-case, A Cure for a Cuckold, and perhaps The Fair Maid of the Inn, are among his latest works, while his theatrical apprenticeship was served in collaborating on city comedies and historical tragedies. However Webster's interest in mixed forms is obvious throughout his independent work and in his later collaborations. In 1604 he contributed an induction to Marston's The Malcontent which is both a lively piece of theatre and a perceptive commentary on the nature of Marston's "bitter" play (Ind. 42). In his epistolary introduction to The White Devil, Webster mentions the "worthy composures" (l.38) of Beaumont and Fletcher as works in whose light he would wish his own to be read. If the play was written in about 1612⁵, Webster must have been involved in its slow and laborious composition during the period in which Beaumont and Fletcher were experimenting with various kinds of tragicomic form in The Knight of the Burning Pestle (1607), The Faithful Shepherdess (1608), Philaster (1609) and A King and No King (1611). For a playwright as interested as Webster has proved himself in mixed forms, these new and suddenly modish plays must have given him a great deal to think about. On the simplest level The White Devil seems to have taken several hints for situations from these early Beaumont and Fletcher plays: one might mention the histrionic lovers' quarrel and reconciliation in IV.ii or the constant use of debate and discussion, or the tragicomedy of Flamineo's mock death in the final scene.

Webster's major plays are explicit about their own mixed

nature. The White Devil excuses itself for being "no true dramatic poem" (To the Reader l.13), not simple in its genre definition but, like Florence's revenge, a "tragedy" mixed with "idle mirth" so that it might "pass" with audiences (lV.i.119-20). The Duchess of Malfi uses comic and tragicomic elements so extensively that it has been seen as a tragedy marred by "comic and satiric confusion"⁶, a "melodrama"⁷ or even a "comitragedy"⁸. This chapter and subsequent chapters will explore Webster's definition and discussion of his own mixed genres. I shall first examine ways in which the two great tragedies "approximate ... tragicomic experience"⁹, how the audience is led through the plays' equivocal descriptions of themselves, and how the endings of the plays preserve or reject the tragicomic compromise. I shall then go on to explore the special features of Webster's own tragicomedies and the ways in which their audiences lead the audience out of the play. First of all, however, it will be necessary to say a few words about Jacobean tragedy and its inclusion of comic incidents, anecdotes and language.

The inclusion of comedy in Jacobean tragedy

Northrop Frye sees comedy as a completed form, a carrying through to the end of a structure which tragedy breaks off and deliberately leaves unfinished¹⁰: again, Aldous Huxley suggested that ~~tragedy~~^{comedy} is "the literature of the Whole Truth"¹¹. Jacobean tragedy often tries to overcome the limitations of its own partialness by extending its "pure art"¹² to include comic anecdotes and devices in its "expropriation of a number of devices traditionally associated with comedy"¹³: the porter scene in Macbeth, for instance, provides a comic vision of hell against which the play's serious treatment of guilt and damnation is held. Many tragedies

of the period introduce a coherent comic or tragicomic subplot: in The Changeling, for example, the subplot shows the underneath of a world gone mad and comments on the "changes" which are taking place in the main plot¹⁴. Many tragedies, then, present a complex version of experience by introducing comedy in an attempt to test the stability and completeness of the tragic framework, and to use the mixture of genres as a way of expressing "the Whole Truth".

Comedy and tragedy can, however, interpenetrate even more closely than in the form of plot and subplot, and tragedies can be built on fundamental principles of irony and comedy. This is one of the major achievements of the Jacobean period, but Marlowe in particular anticipated it. All his plays, and especially Dr. Faustus and The Jew of Malta, are built on an uneasy process of alternate expansion and contraction, so that tragic horror is profoundly modified by comic and tragicomic ironies. Dr. Faustus does not simply have a comic subplot: the terror of Faustus' position is scored across by comedy and farce, as Faustus and Mephistophilis disrupt a papal banquet, provide an audience for the grotesque masque of the Seven Deadly Sins, or as Faustus eats a cart-load of hay or cheats a horse-courser or stages a parody of Christ's resurrection with the help of a false head^{14A}. In its disquieting contradictions between the cosmic battle of good and evil and the utterly trivial jokes in which Faustus is distracted, the play suggests a series of almost tragicomic discords at the centre of which is the double image of Faustus and Christ. Throughout the play Faustus is torn between reading life as tragedy or comedy. Finally "in the world we prove real by dying in it"¹⁵ tragedy wins and the comic reactions are defeated - "Fools that will laugh on earth must weep in hell" (V.ii.106). The play is a tragedy of the loss of aim and the loss of dignity, which expresses itself

substantially through Marlowe's hard, detached, and entirely undignified comedy.

This playing off against each other of tragic and comic effects is also crucial to Marston's "seriously fantastical" tragedies (Antonio and Mellida, dedication "To ... Nobody", l.6), to The Atheist's Tragedy and The Revenger's Tragedy, to the tragedies of Middleton and to some of the tragedies of Shakespeare, all of which "approximate ... tragicomic experience". Even Hamlet makes use of some "distinctively comic effects"¹⁶, and King Lear is shaped by "the comedy of the grotesque"¹⁷. The Revenger's Tragedy develops in a complex series of ironic reversals, and is a play where the "tragic view of life" is expressed through the "methods of farce"¹⁸. Finally Women Beware Women presents a world where the naturalistic details of ordinary life, a chess game, a visit, a wedding celebration, a ducal procession eagerly watched by an old woman and her daughter-in-law, who imagines the duke has looked at her, are loaded with pain and passion. This play with its lack of villains, its casual hypocrisies, its significant domestic detail, its elaborate love-intrigues and bitter ironies suggests a "mood not too far removed from the spirit of comedy"¹⁹. Revenge tragedy and comedy of manners face each other across the play: "Middleton appears to be on the verge of creating a novel kind of drama that occupies a middle ground between comedy and tragedy"²⁰.

The whole movement of Jacobean drama seems to be toward a mixed genre that might express "the Whole Truth". At about the same time Marston and Beaumont and Fletcher established the sceptical, ambiguous form of tragicomedy as a popular and repeatable dramatic kind, and Marlowe, Tourneur and Shakespeare devised a complex and resilient form of tragedy which was strong enough to

include and to defeat comedy and farce. The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi do not exist in a vacuum. They are not unique in their admission of comic and tragicomic elements, but they do use them with unusual coherence, and comedy and tragicomedies are treated not only as a threat which tragedy must face and overcome, but also as a form of real reservation about the tragic absolutes and as part of a rigorous critical double vision.

Tragicomedies in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi.

As a writer interested in mixed genres and beginning to write independently in about 1612, there were three models to which Webster might have turned for structures by which the "partial truth" of tragedy might be extended. There was formal tragicomedies of the kind written by Marston and Fletcher to which Webster turned in the 1620s, tragicomedies based on comedy, with a structure of discords and double vision, a critical distrust of its own rhetoric, and a close and explicit audience-play relationship. There was the extended tragedy of King Lear or The Revenger's Tragedy, a kind which Webster seems to allude to in his use of grotesque physical horrors and of extreme ironic reversals. Finally there was Tudor tragical comedy, tragicomedies based on tragedy, often with a foreshortened ending and making use of a rigorous description of its own mixed nature. ~~Webster's use of the plot of Antony and Cleopatra for the historical tragedy in which he seems to have had a hand suggests he knew these plays.~~ Webster, then, had a number of models for his own tragicomic synthesis, a fact which may have enabled his plays to achieve their unique richness and complexity in their integration of the genres.

In reading or in performance one of the most immediately striking aspects of the two plays is their juxtaposition of tones within and between scenes. In The White Devil Flamineo and in The Duchess of Malfi Bosola attack the passions of their masters and their ideals of achievement and order with satire, undermining their tragic absolutes. At the first meeting of Brachiano and Vittoria their sensual, egocentric concept of love is challenged by the possessive jealousy of Camillo, the hysterical moralising of Cornelia, and the bawdy commentary of Flamineo and Zanche. The scene begins in comedy, as Flamineo gulls the ridiculous Camillo with a series of dramatic double meanings really aimed at Brachiano, and the tone of the scene is repeatedly described as "happy" (1.ii.6,10,16,205). The second half of the scene, however, takes on the tones of tragedy, as Vittoria relates the "dream" (1.ii.231) which will lead to two murders, and Cornelia delivers the terrible curse that Vittoria should, like Judas, betray the man she kisses (1.ii.298). By the second scene, both a comic and a tragic ending have been suggested. In the same way in The Duchess of Malfi the Duchess' commitment to love, self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice, and its expression in her pregnancy, is challenged by Bosola's satirical descriptions of her and of sexuality in general. Juxtaposition of tones, however, runs deeper than this constant use of satirical commentary, and even than the comparison of potentially comic and potentially tragic actions and motives. Brachiano, for instance, is at least partly a comic character. In his first interview with Monticelso, Florence and his wife his tone is at first flippant and amused - "They are but crackers!" (1.1.73). He provides a punning answer to Florence's accusation of impropriety with Vittoria - "Happily" (1.1.53). - as later in the same

scene but in a bitterer vein he gives Isabella's excuse for her visit to Rome, "Devotion" (11.i.150), an unwelcome double meaning. Brachiano is, at least at first, playing a comic scene, while Isabella is acting out a "sad ... part" (11.i.225), an exercise in pathetic tragedy which even her brother Florence can only interpret as comedy, a source of "excellent laughter" (11.i.276). The three have nothing in common, not even the kind of play in which they see themselves taking part. Again in The Duchess of Malfi the wooing scene seems to be basically comic, as a young woman defies the weight of convention to marry the man she loves, but it is disturbed by ominous suggestions of death and madness, by the discussion of the will and Antonio's fear of ambition, the "great man's madness" (1.i.420). Even the image of the shroud and of the sheets of the wedding bed coalesce (1.i.389). The play discusses the possibility of a tragedy which is founded on a comic act. In the disintegrating world of the play, material which comedy specifically affirms - the independence of love, fiction, art, laughter - is seen to lead directly to a tragic catastrophe. Cause and effect are dislocated, as the play insists that tragedy and comedy are each an essential part of its experience.

The two plays, then, create tragicomic discords by contrasting tragic and comic interpretations of action, by showing comic commitment leading to tragedy or tragic passion modified by comic detachment. More specifically, the two plays suggest tragicomedy in their use of what seems to be a particularly tragicomic device, the use of ironic repetition in which the tragic status of an incident is undercut or its comic status is made increasingly uneasy. In The White Devil especially this is a major structural device. Roma Gill finds the play "disjointed"²¹, rich

in striking incidents but lacking in overall design. On the contrary it seems to me that the play's scenes are close connected by an elaborate and coherent system of parallels and repetitions, so that any scene can easily and effectively recall its past or suggest its future. Certain patterns, visual or verbal, "figure in action" and "figure in language"²² are repeated again and again. The ironic use of the kiss, for instance, runs throughout the play. A conventional sign of love, it is used to register divorce (11.i.192,253) and as a method of murder (11.i.301,11.ii.26-31): finally to withhold the kiss which might poison becomes the final sign of love.(V.iii.26)²³. Hardly an act,statement or image exists in isolation. In the arraignment scene, for example, Brachiano interrupts the court's ritualistic pieties by coming uninvited and by providing himself with a "chair" (111.ii.4) of his own. In half comic defiance he spreads out on the floor "a rich gown" (111.ii.4 SD) and sits on it. Even this comparatively trivial act does not exist in isolation, however. The audience is succinctly reminded of the first meeting of Brachiano and Vittoria, when Zanche spread out a "carpet" with cushions for the lovers (1.ii.204 SD). By this apparently casual repetition we are reminded, at the beginning of Vittoria's trial, of the crime of which she is accused. Webster was a notoriously slow worker: one of the reasons for this ^{may have been} the extraordinary richness of his plays and his meticulous care in providing this elaborate tragicomic web of echo, repetition, parody, contrast and allusion.

Most striking of the tragicomic uses of repetition in The White Devil is the way in which almost all the play's major incidents are closely repeated and parodied. The arraignment of Vittoria is closely followed by Brachiano's interrogation of her.

Brachiano's declaration of divorce from Isabella is followed by a repetition of the scene in which she enacts the part of the destroyer of the marriage. She closely repeats Brachiano's words but her agonised and half ridiculous hyperbole - "a thousand ears ... a thousand lawyers' hands ..." (11.i.287-8) tips the scene over into parody. Again in the last scene Flamineo reverses this order of a serious followed by a parodic version of experience by acting out a grotesque fiction of his own death, so that a farcical image of finality and a tragic image face each other across the last scene. The White Devil with its elaborate system of repetition and parody, its ironic contrasts between interpretations of experience, and its coherent sense that any incident is intimately connected with other incidents, fits the shifting values and the ironic double-vision of tragicomedy into the tragic framework of aspiration, failure and death. The use of repetition reminds us constantly of the system of cause and effect behind the action. When tragicomedy fails, it is often because it has neglected this simple logic. The White Devil broadens the audience's response by suggesting the logic of tragedy behind the events and the clashing tones of tragicomedy, and is a coherent evocation of a disturbed and disturbing world.

In The White Devil the play's system of internal repetition and parody forms links between seemingly unlike characters and events: a single word, image or gesture suddenly takes on an independent life and strikes a spark with the past. In The Duchess of Malfi this system of repetition and parody is less elaborate and less fragmented. A single incident is repeated and repeated throughout the play: the Duchess' wooing of Antonio. These reflected images of the wooing scene, moreover, become increasingly grotesque as the play progresses, so that the "complex and

debatable"²⁴ event of the Duchess' secret marriage is examined and re-examined throughout the play. In 111.ii. Ferdinand, maddened with pain and jealousy, bursts into his sister's bedroom to confront her and her husband, and the whole scene begins to take on the forms of the earlier wooing scene. The phallic imagery in Ferdinand's gift of the poniard grimly recalls the Duchess' playful banter about the old tale in which a naked sword is placed between the lovers to keep them chaste (1.i.500-1). The earlier scene is also suggested in its images of the tomb and of funerary sculpture, by the subsequent use of the "quietus" image (1.i.464., 111.ii.188), and by the basic stage-pattern of an interview watched by others from concealment. At the end of the wooing scene, Antonio was startled when Cariola revealed herself: here, badly frightened, he turns on her and accuses her of betrayal. The whole scene is an ironic reflection of the earlier one with love replaced by hate as its motivating force. It marks the undoing, at least temporarily, of some of the play's hard won lessons about love and trust: not only does the terrified Antonio distrust Cariola, but the Duchess even suggests, briefly, that Ferdinand came to her by Antonio's "confederacy" (111.ii.88).

The wooing scene is recalled more grimly in Act 1V and especially in the scene of the Duchess' murder. The image of funerary sculpture is repeated (1V.ii.33, 156-162), the Duchess discusses her "last will" (1V.ii.200), which was the pretext for summoning Antonio to the wooing scene, she talks again of children and Bosola's dirge which is also an epithalamium recalls the ceremony of marriage itself²⁵. Even the masque of madmen seems a kind of concrete presentation of some of the images of the wooing scene, Antonio's fear that his "ambition" in marrying the Duchess

was a kind of "madness" (1.i.240-), and Cariola's interpretation of the Duchess' divided loyalties as a "fearful madness" (1.i.506). In the first scene the Duchess raises Antonio from his knees - "This goodly roof of yours is too low built ..." (1.i.416): in 1V.ii she kneels to register her own humility. The two scenes, in fact, are closely linked, the later completing strands of imagery in the former. The wooing scene is shown to contain madness and death within its reassuring frame of sanity and normality, and by its implicit comparison with what has gone before, the death scene firmly marks her secret marriage as the cause of the Duchess' murder, but also as a source of her strength.

Finally the wooing scene reappears in grotesquely comic form in Julia's wooing of Bosola. Julia, who prizes love above social conventions and who dies as a result of this commitment, provides a copy in miniature of the career of the Duchess, a coarser and less disinterested version of the dead woman, who continues to suggest her values but also undercuts them by her fickleness. As the Duchess flouted convention to marry the man she loved, Julia woos Bosola, and like the Duchess it is she who has to set the man at his ease. These key scenes in the play, then, are developed as increasingly grotesque distortions of a single act: the Duchess' active commitment to life is repeated again and again throughout the play, becoming more extreme and meaningless as the society of the play, deprived of the Duchess' healing presence, falls apart into melancholy, apathy, madness and murder.

As tragicomic discords are suggested in the two plays by repetition and comparison of incidents, similar connections between apparently very unlike characters are also suggested. In The white Devil, for instance, Isabella, Cornelia, Vittoria and Zanche are

all at some point in the play described as "Fury"²⁶. The jealous and generous wife, the moralistic mother, the passionate, amoral and ambitious lover and the lustful and short-sighted Moor are all fundamentally the same kind of person, tough, emphatic and perhaps predatory, and all are destroyed by the men who use them. In The White Devil this system of parallels and comparison is repeatedly used to undermine the tragic status of the noble characters. When Brachiano's wooing of Vittoria in the second scene is directly juxtaposed with Camillo's courting of his wife through his brother-in-law, it seems that the effect is a simple contrast, the passionate and impatient aristocrat against the aging and stupid citizen. Even here, Flamineo's mockery of Camillo seems to extend to Brachiano, who is also ridiculed by his secretary's cool detachment. As the play progresses, indeed, Camillo and Brachiano come to seem increasingly alike. Like Camillo, Brachiano seems to have "high gifts of learning" (11.i.30-- compare 1.ii.135) but like Camillo he is also a "fool" (1V.11.142). Both are described by the emblem of the stag, a horned animal with violent sexual appetites (11.i.94, 11.i.325). Both men are murdered during athletic exercises: in the second scene Flamineo makes a bawdy jest about Camillo and "the great barriers" (1.ii.28-9) and for Brachiano his barriers turn into "unfortunate revels" (V.iii.8). The extended comparison deflates Brachiano's pretensions to heroic status, and shows grotesque comedy modifying even the play's theme of passionate love.

In The Duchess of Malfi the comparison of characters, like that of incidents, is less fragmented and more clearly organised. Especially interesting are the unexpected links drawn between Antonio and Bosola²⁷, the diffident husband and the tormentor and satirist. Antonio first introduces Bosola and

thus helps to control the audience's response to him (1.i.23-8, 74-82), and he and Delio are on stage during Bosola's first interview with the Cardinal: the two men are associated in Ferdinand's mind at 1.i.228-9. Antonio who took the ring oftenest and who praises noble horsemanship (1.i.143-6) is linked with Bosola who holds the provisorship of the horse and who gives the Duchess apricots ripened in horse-dung. As the play progresses the relationship of the Duchess and Antonio is replaced at the centre of the play by her more ambiguous relationship with Bosola. At the end of the play it is Bosola who takes the part which should have been Antonio's, bringing "comfort" (1V.i.137) to the Duchess, rebuking Ferdinand, begging the "fair soul" (1V.ii.342) to return to life, imagining himself haunted by the dead woman. The play shows the effect of one woman's life upon three men: Ferdinand is driven mad, Antonio's precarious sense of self is almost destroyed, and Bosola manages to achieve some kind of new clarity of vision although, as I shall show, this is treated with profound irony and ambiguity.

Webster's two tragedies, then, suggest the methods of tragicomedy in their ironic organisation, their use of discords, ironic repetition and contrast. Again, the characterisation of the plays seems influenced by that of tragicomedy. E.M. Waith²⁸ has suggested that Fletcher brought to seventeenth century drama a new kind of characterisation in which people were shown as multi-faceted, lacking the firm explicitness of characterisation of earlier plays. These characters are in a sense the opposite of flat characters: they are always capable of surprising us, as we expect them to. We are not invited to share their consciousness in the way that we share that of Shakespeare's tragic heroes: they speak few soliloquies, and their internal life is suggested more obliquely

in ironic divergences between the character as he seems to us and as he seems to other characters in the play, as in the case of Philaster. These self-absorbed, self-conscious characters suggest the real triviality of experience, and it is the task of the audience to evaluate and reconcile their convincing inconsistencies. Webster seems to have adopted these discontinuous tragicomic characters for his own purposes. In The White Devil almost all the characters have this convincing inconsistency with which real people seem to behave. Marcello and Cornelia, for instance, have fine moral sensibilities, but they acquiesce in Vittoria's dubious marriage when they can profit from it. Monticelso, after advocating revenge and murder, laboriously reaches out for a system of moral absolutes only to have this new commitment undermined by circumstances, as Florence bribes Lodovico in the name of the new Pope. Almost every character in the play is developed in terms of antithesis: Isabella is hysterically jealous but capable of unexpected generosity, Brachiano is a noble soldier and scholar but also a "fool"²⁹. Vittoria especially shamelessly torments her husband and suggests his murder to her lover, but she defends herself with such "innocence-resembling boldness"³⁰ that the whole question of guilt and innocence becomes irrelevant: in this world of shifting perspectives we are not judging moral absolutes but only the quality of the performance. Finally as Brachiano dies he sees her as a false steward and as an aging woman who has betrayed her husband, but also as "this good woman" (V.iii.17), a heroic aspirer worthy of "infinite worlds". Neither of these contradictory views destroys the other: the two exist side by side, and the audience must accept both halves of the dramatic antithesis, and that truth is subjective and that real people do not conform to the character-types of art.

In The White Devil this world of antithetical and wavering characters drawn with "extreme objectivity" revolves round an unwavering centre, Flamineo, the malcontent drawn with "extreme inwardness"³¹. One effect of the bewildering shape-shifting of the other characters is that we seem to see them and their actions through Flamineo's eyes. He stands between us and the action, interpreting for us the gestures and the rhetoric of his fellow actors, although we are never allowed to forget that his interpretations are not uniformly trustworthy. Flamineo acts the part of wavering and shifting character in his personae of "politic madman" (III.ii.308) and his "varying of shapes" (IV.ii.246) but, until the play's last moments, we always know when Flamineo is dissembling. He is the only character who is given anything like a soliloquy, almost the only character who consistently and in detail explains to us how he feels or why he is acting as he is. The "inwardness" of the drawing of his character, his associations with comedy and satire, his directing power and control and his restless intelligence, all contribute to his perverse attractiveness. If there is a degree of realism in the play's antithetical characters as they suggest the way in which we apprehend others, our "inwardness" with Flamineo permits us to perceive him in much the same way as we apprehend our selves. We understand his feelings and his intentions, although there remains an area of his consciousness, as of our own, that we do not fully understand. He is thus placed in a particularly close relationship with the audience, a relationship which, as I shall show, contributes to some of the play's most distinctive tragicomic effects, especially in the final act.

The White Devil, then, experiments with fitting

Fletcherian tragicomic characters into a predominantly tragic structure. The characterisation is objective and antithetical, with a curious realism which reflects the way in which outside the explicitness of art, we apprehend and judge ourselves and other people. The Duchess of Malfi appears to be more clearly a linear play, and also seems to be "a play about character"³² more simply than The White Devil, perhaps a more Shakesperean play in which action is clearly the product of character and of human choice. The White Devil approaches tragicomedy in the profound ambivalence of its characters: in The Duchess of Malfi the use of formal "characters" to control and sharpen our response to and judgement of the play's people produces a more solid, and a more uniformly detached, system of characterisation. People repeatedly describe the shape of other people's characters: Castruchio and Malateste exist almost solely in satirical denunciations and Pescara in laudatory description. The Cardinal, Ferdinand and the Duchess are clearly described at the beginning of the first act (1.i.152-204), and Bosola and Ferdinand as well as Malateste are described in 111.iii, a scene whose lack of physical action prepares for the violence to come. These "characters" produce an effect rather unlike the shifting ambiguousness of The White Devil. The Duchess is more simply a "good" character than Vittoria, a woman committed to real human relationships, to love and life, whose motherhood is a potent image which is set against the sterility of her society, and against the insistence in The White Devil on Vittoria's childlessness³³. She is a simple character trapped in an ambiguous world, forced into elaborate forms of pretence, "masks and curtains" (111.ii.159), when her own impulses would have preferred frank and generous demonstrations of feeling.

Again, the use of "characters" is to produce a distance between the audience and the people so described, a distance which is preserved for the rest of the play: even in the case of the Duchess, Cariola, Bosola or Antonio are required as intermediaries. Both plays, indeed, regulate the audience-play relation by detaching us from the events described. In The White Devil we see events filtered through the consciousness of Flamineo, and our interpretations are moulded by his exuberant scepticism, and by the fact that we are allowed to appreciate the double-vision of the play, seeing Brachiano's declaration of divorce as well as Isabella's re-enactment of it. Flamineo's perverse vitality and his explanations of action and feeling make him something like the play's centre of sympathy as well as the central consciousness. In The Duchess of Malfi the Duchess is the centre of sympathy, but the central consciousness is provided by an alternation of Antonio and Bosola. Antonio starts the play with a special relationship with the audience: like him, we are newcomers to the court of Malfi, and we appreciate his descriptions and his political generalisations. He is introduced first as an acute critic, then as an athlete, "a good horseman" (l.i.140), "an upright treasurer" (l.i.372), "a complete man" (l.i.435). However, while the Duchess' marriage completes her sense of her own identity, it seems almost to destroy Antonio's, and as the play progresses his virtues are significantly undermined and this special relationship with the audience is stretched and distorted. His acute judgement and his athleticism are compromised by his "fear" and his passionate desire for safety, both key words of his in the second half of the play³⁴. Even his status as "upright treasurer" is compromised as he is forced to act out the fiction of being banished for embezzlement.

As Antonio is gradually distanced from the audience and significantly reduced in stature his function as guide and director for the audience is taken over by Bosola. Antonio is divided by the conflict between his fear and his love, between his ideal of "a fixed order" in society (l.i.6) and his crippling sense of his own presumption in sinning against this order by his marriage. Bosola is as painfully divided between his own clarity of moral vision and his inability to do what he sees to be right. His incisive moral sense, his natural barometer for truth and falsehood, and his natural sympathy with suffering have a grotesque dark side in his inability to let moral insight dictate moral action, his dependence on his own control of fiction, and his devastating and painful satirical outbursts. Louis D. Gianetti in a perceptive article discusses the function of Bosola's character, seeing it as "an important physical link" between audience and play, "a visual metaphor ... a bridge by which the audience can vicariously enter the world of the play"³⁵. He stresses the prominence of Bosola in any production of the play, the fact that he is so frequently on stage even if only as a silent observer - "Here is a major difference between text and production". In The White Devil a group of discontinuous tragicomic characters is related to us by Flamineo, who seems a simpler, more direct character. In The Duchess of Malfi, a group of more conventionally conceived tragic characters is related to us by two discontinuous and ambiguous commentators Antonio and Bosola, who control the relationship of audience and play and who change places in the course of the play. The two plays provide different versions of the synthesis of tragedy and tragicomedy, slightly different visions of a violent and untrustworthy world, where tragedy and comedy become blurred and confused.

The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, then, share certain features of tragicomedy, the ironic use of repetition and contrast, of unexpected links between events and characters, discontinuous characters who are related to the audience through the intermediary of a commentator, the juxtaposition of clashing tones and definitions. In the next two chapters I shall be looking at contrasts between the plays and their individual features, other ways in which the plays suggest tragicomedy, in their definition of genres, their inclusion of miniature comedies and tragicomedies, and their treatment of the dramatic ending. First, however, I want to say a few words about another way in which the plays move away from tragedy, their use to an unexpected extent of the language of comedy.

The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, and the vocabulary of comedy.

When the ghost of his father has confirmed the suspicions of Hamlet's prophetic soul and has revealed the truth about his own death and Claudius' guilt, one of Hamlet's sharpest apprehensions is that of the divergence of appearance and reality, that Claudius can "smile, and smile and be a villain" (1.v.115). In The Changeling, after Beatrice-Joanna has finally bought Alsemero at a price higher than even she had expected, Deflores watches her wedding procession "smiling" when the ghost of the murdered Alonso "appears to Deflores in the midst of his smile" and "startles" him, as the procession passes over the stage "in great solemnity" (1V.i. initial SD). Finally in The Revenger's Tragedy Lussurioso attempts to persuade Piato-Vindice to act as his pander to Castiza. Lussurioso gloats that the girl's own brother Hippolito recommended

Piato to him - "We may laugh at the simple age within him" - and Vindice, who perceives still deeper ramifications to the irony, dutifully replies "Ha, ha, ha" (1.iii.151ff.).

Laughter and the smile, it seems, have a peculiar status in tragedy. The smile isolates the smiler - Claudius in his own private world of deception keeps a tight smile on his face - and it may rebuke him, as Deflores is rebuked. It indicates that two different levels of consciousness confront one another, as Vindice's laughter isolates him and points out that his understanding of the situation is superior to that of Lussurioso. The smile or laugh may have a particularly predatory and sinister aspect, marking a deliberate withholding of sympathy. In comedy, and perhaps in drama in general, laughter usually has "the role of a normative agent"³⁶. Its function in tragedy, however, is often more complex and disturbing. It may encapsulate tragic intimations of the sinister and threatening, of aggression, detachment and isolation. At the same time it may also, with nostalgia or with the sense of itself expressing a more profound truth, suggest a genuinely comic world, the realm of "the Whole Truth" which tragedy is not to enter. The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi seem, above all other Jacobean tragedies, to use significantly the vocabulary of comedy in order to extend the tragedy, and to present potent rivals, victorious or defeated, to its "Partial Truth".

The White Devil uses the vocabulary of comedy extensively, testing every stage of the tragic experience against the patterns and vocabulary of comedy. The "paradoxical figure"³⁷ of laughter especially haunts the play. The words "laugh", "laughter" and "laughing" occur thirteen times in the play, and in addition on seven occasions laughter is specifically written into the stage

directions or must be assumed to be happening on stage. The words "merry", "mirth", "jest" or "jests", "ridiculous" or "ridiculously", "gullery", "simpers" and "smiling" are also prominent throughout the play³⁸. J.R. Mulryne sees the play as including "an ... unmistakable current of humour" and suggests that one character, Flamineo, "comes close to being simply an embodiment of this temper"³⁹. Flamineo certainly uses more comedy-words than any other single character - fourteen verbal references to laughter and jest, three references used of him, as well as his numerous witty anecdotes and conceits, jokes and satirical set-pieces. Perhaps the inclusion of Flamineo suggests that kind of tragicomedy which Karl Guthke describes as that in which "an essentially comic person ... finds himself in the world of tragedy and is overcome by it"⁴⁰. However, hardly a character fails to use the vocabulary of comedy - Lodovico and his henchmen have eleven references, Florence four, Brachiano three, Camillo and Dr. Julio two, and Isabella, Monticelso, Zanche, Marcello, Giovanni, a Courtier and Vittoria herself one each. Significantly only Cornelia never directly uses the language of comedy: she does not belong to the disturbed world of the play. At the centre of the play, a significant part of its "equilibrium of opposites"⁴¹, is the uneasy partnership of a predominantly tragic heroine and a predominantly comic-satiric malcontent. Linking them is Brachiano, who in the early part of the play seems bent on imposing a comic interpretation on the pain around him: his flippancy in his first meeting with Isabella contrasts with her agony, and even in the arraignment scene he enters, treats the scene as a comedy, makes a few jokes, pettishly loses his temper, and deserts Vittoria to fend for herself. Where his own passions are uninvolved, he sees nothing but comedy: it is all

too appropriate that the death-scene of this man, who was unable to take suffering seriously, should be surrounded by disquieting images of comedy, haunted by puns⁴² and by Brachiano's own laughter, a horrible echo of the laughter of Isabella's murderers in 11.ii.

As the play's use of the language of comedy is not restricted to any one character, so it is not confined to any single scene. The scene with most references is 111.iii with nine direct references; Flamineo and Lodovico temporarily join forces, reducing the whole oppressive world around them to a satirical vision of corruption and decay. In this disintegrating world words like "girn" and "grieve" (111.iii.90,84) take on references to laughter and comedy. Finally the new allies quarrel and part with violence and with a comic interpretation of it - "I spake that laughing ... This laughter scurvily becomes your face ... now I laugh too" (111.iii.112,122,124). A largely comic scene, this separates two important tragic scenes, the arraignment of Vittoria and Florence's plotting of his revenge. As an interval apparently free from violence and danger it develops as a self-consciously staged comic scene, sectioned off from its surroundings - "Mark this strange encounter ..." (111.iii.65). However even this comedy with its comparative safety falls into the forms of grotesque violence which shape the play: the last chance to allow comedy to decide the play's course fails, and from this point disaster seems inevitable.

Apart from this last-ditch attempt to reassert comedy as the play's norm, the language of comedy is used most extensively in the most obviously "tragic" scenes. 11.i, where Brachiano meets Isabella and plots her murder, has five comedy-words, and the final scene, where Flamineo chooses to "laugh" rather than to die

"whining" (V.vi.194-5), has three. Webster deliberately creates a dichotomy between an event and the human reaction to it. Murder is greeted by laughter, a tragedy of revenge must have "some idle mirth" (IV.i.119) in it, Lodovico's noble enemies "laugh" at his "misery" (I.i.24), the Machiavel makes his enemies "die laughing" (V.iii.196), and even Florence sees his sister's agony only as a potential source of "excellent laughter" (II.i.276). The White Devil uses both tragedy and comedy to evoke a world without human sympathy, a world of self-centred self-seekers, where the ordinary logic of existence is splintered and where pain is greeted by laughter and jests form the prologue to murder.

The White Devil uses the vocabulary of comedy to allow its tragedy to tell "the Whole Truth", to relate it to the real world, and to depict a breakdown in human experience in which suffering and humiliation produce the comic response and comic action leads to tragedy. Comedy and tragedy are not at odds. There seems, indeed, little effective difference between the two: the genres seem to be flattering bells that have one tune at weddings and at funerals, since both spring from violence and pain, and the most tragic scenes are on the whole also the most comic. In The Duchess of Malfi, at least in the early part of the play, comedy and tragedy are antithetical, significantly organised so that they oppose each other: the play treats them as opposites rather than as fundamentally the same, another sign of its apparently more conventional organisation. In The White Devil there are forty-three direct uses of the vocabulary and gestures of comedy: in The Duchess of Malfi there are thirty, so that the actual number of references is significantly smaller, especially in the direct depiction of laughter. In The White Devil the play is permeated with the

language and structures of comedy: almost every character and scene uses the comic vocabulary. In The Duchess of Malfi verbal and structural suggestions of comedy are less evenly spread. They cluster around obviously comic centres, the court amusements in 1.i, Bosola's satirical monologues and his "jest" (11.i.140) with the apricots, the grotesque comedy in which the Cardinal is trapped in V.v. By far the greatest number of comedy-words occur in the first act: the world of the play is immediately established as one in which laughter and jest are a normal part of life, a world of people with a common ground who can share jokes and moral discussion and who have a common interest in moral and intellectual judgements and a common medium for expressing them. However, unlike The White Devil the play undermines its comic half by seeing it as narrowly satirical, destructive and anarchic, as posing a threat to the tragic experience rather than contributing to it.

The first scene is at the centre of the play's discussion of comedy and of its hostile definition of laughter. The play's implicit judgements, simpler than those of The White Devil, depend to some extent on the placing of its people according to their attitude to comedy. Ferdinand is the leader of the faction which supports satirical comedy. Throughout the play he is associated with laughter in its most hostile and reductive form: he "laughs/ Like a deadly cannon" (111.iii.54-5). His devotion to laughter is a sign of his cruel aggressiveness - he declares himself ready to "laugh" at Castruchio's fool, a dumb idiot (1.i.129) - and a trap for the unwary. His "mirth, is merely outside" (1.i.170), his laughter is a means "to laugh/All honesty out of fashion" (1.i. 171-2). He insists on his own mastery of this grim and brutal comedy, staging the horrible joke with the dead man's hand, and

writing punning letters to the Duchess⁴³. He insists that he is lord over laughter, to raise or to still it at his own pleasure: he makes bawdy jokes and then disclaims their bawdiness, or stills the bawdy laughter of his courtiers with an assertion of his own absolute power over comedy - "Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers should ... laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty" (1.i.122-5). Laughter is also an index of Ferdinand's detachment from real human relationships. When he seeks the most potent possible image for the way in which he feels that the Duchess by marrying has excluded him from her love, he imagines that he can "see her, laughing" (11.v.38). This sense of disintegration, the act of laughter divorced from its comic context, sight divorced from sound, implies the profound dividedness of the world of the play. When Ferdinand appears to reject laughter and satire, "Pasquil's paper bullets" (111.i.49), it is a sure sign that he is dissembling. Of the seventeen references to laughter in the play, six are made by Ferdinand and three by others about him.⁴⁴

Laughter as a guide to character is perhaps more important than in The White Devil, where almost all the characters use the language of comedy. Ferdinand and Bosola support reductive and satirical laughter: in the final act the Cardinal is trapped in dangerous farce. Even Antonio is touched by this violent comedy as he stages what is intended as a comic scene, tiptoeing away from his wife to make her "angry" (111.ii.57). On the whole the women oppose them. Castruchio's "lady" (1.i.131) Julia is immediately dissociated from the male definition of comedy: whereas Ferdinand is prepared to "laugh" at the dumb idiot (1.i.129) she cannot "abide" him, "nor...to be in merry company" (1.i.133). Julia the great woman of pleasure is perhaps rather humourless, like Vittoria. The Duchess, however, is

associated with "wit, gaiety and tenderness"⁴⁵: she tones down the language of comedy, removing the cruelty and threat implied in Ferdinand's use of it and giving it a unique feminine interpretation, imbuing Cariola and at times Antonio with her gentle sense of comedy. She determines to make her will "smiling" (1.i.378), she accepts Bosola's "jest" with the apricots (11.i.140), she stands up to and defeats his satirical attack on women, sexuality and birth, she rejoices to be "so merry" with Antonio (111.v.53) and determines to be "a little merry" (1V.ii.151) even with her executioners. Finally her death is posed as a contest between her own confidence in the tragic and comic absolutes and the cruel comedy of madness and despair which Ferdinand attempts to impose on her. The masque of madmen is intended to force her "to laugh" (1V.ii.41) as it had for the Pope: the Duchess however can use even this source of cruel laughter for a positive purpose, to keep her in her "right wits" (1V.ii.6). Having defeated these last threats posed by satire, farce and melodrama, she can face death asserting the values of tragic commitment and of wit and humour, and we believe her.

The use of comedy and the vocabulary of comedy, then, is rather different in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi. In the later play it is used less extensively and with greater hostility. In The White Devil we view the action largely through the people who use comedy: in The Duchess of Malfi we are alienated by them. The play stages a number of small comic scenes but these are most often revealed as cruel, like the masque of madmen, or destructive and reductive, like the scene in which the Cardinal's elaborate precautions ironically bring about his own death. In The Duchess of Malfi attitudes to comedy mould our attitudes to the

characters of the play and help to create a disintegrating society which includes "comic elements fraught with tragic overtones" and "tragic elements that tend to laughter"⁴⁶. In The White Devil almost every character uses comedy, and comedy and tragedy become almost indistinguishable. Like The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi includes comic, tragicomic and farcical episodes, but again they tend to be more muted than in the earlier tragedy. The comic dialogues and anecdotes are all in a low key, like the dialogues of everyday life, and have the rather crude flippancy or facetiousness of real conversation. Moreover comic dialogue and anecdote tends not to focus on the main characters, as it does so often in The White Devil, but rather on characters at the fringe of the action, like Castruchio or Malateste. In The White Devil satire tells truths about the world of the play, and comedy is an intimate part of the central experiences of the play, of the directing ambitions of Flamineo, the passion of Brachiano, or the revenge of Florence and Lodovico. In The Duchess of Malfi two kinds of comedy, the masculine and feminine, satire and humour, clash across the play. The Duchess manages to preserve for herself the absolutes of tragedy and of comedy, but after her death the simple genres fall apart and the dramatic world dissolves into the forms of farce, melodrama, and tragicomedy.

Tragicomedy in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi: Conclusions.

Webster's two independent tragedies, then, suggest the forms and interests of tragicomedy with their significant juxtaposition of tones, incidents and images, repetition, contrast, unexpected links between characters. Especially interesting is the

use in the plays of the vocabulary of comedy in an attempt to extend tragedy into a form telling "the Whole Truth". If "Tragedy deals in absolutes"⁴⁷, then in these two plays Webster is experimenting with the addition of comedy and tragicomedy to produce a quasi-tragic form closer to his own determinedly non-absolutist interpretation of experience, tragedy made with the materials and even with the language of comedy and tragicomedy.

In the next two chapters I wish to examine more closely the final scenes of these two plays in order to continue my investigation of the plays' use of the vocabulary of comedy, their use of suggestions from various kinds of mixed play, and their playing off against each other of their rich and equivocal generic definitions. I shall be looking more specifically at the involvement of the audience in the ending of the play, and the way in which the ending mediates between the world and the play. I shall try to suggest similarities and contrasts between the two plays which, although companion pieces, do seem to have important differences which have not been sufficiently investigated. Finally, the endings of these two plays seem to be uniquely important, that of The White Devil because of its explicit use of fictions, its complex mixture of the genres and its use of the images of audience and actors, and that of The Duchess of Malfi because it is the point of the play which diverges most strikingly from the play's apparently more conventional framework. Madeleine Doran describes three "specific meanings" of tragicomedy, "a mixture of tragic and comic episodes, and of the feelings appropriate to these", "a mixture of social classes" and "a combination of the serious action of tragedy with the happy ending of comedy"⁴⁸. In only the last of these do Webster's two tragedies fail to fit this definition of tragicomedy. In my

investigation of their final scenes, I shall look more fully at their clashing genre definitions and at their equivocal identity as tragicomedies with tragic endings.

NOTES

1. See W. Carew Hazlitt, Old English Jest-Books volume 111 (1864), "Conceits, Clinches, Flashes and Whimsies", p.2.
2. WD V.i.176, "Lovers' oaths are like mariners' prayers".
3. WD 111.ii.96-8, "Worse than dead bodies which are begg'd at gallows/And wrought upon by surgeons, to teach man/Wherein he is imperfect."
4. Gamaliel Bradford, "The Women of Middleton and Webster" (Sewanee Review 29 1921) p.22.
5. As Harbage's Annals (1964) suggests.
6. Jane M. Luecke, "The Duchess of Malfi: comic and satiric confusion in a tragedy" (SEL 4 1964) p.275.
7. Robert Heilman, Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience (^{Seattle} ~~Washington~~ 1968). On pp. 61-72 he discusses the play as a "Drama of Disaster" which on p.74 is defined as "An Aspect of Melodrama".
8. Normand Berlin, "The Duchess of Malfi: Act V and Genre" (Genre 1970) p.362.
9. J.R. Mulryne, "Webster and the Uses of Tragicomedy" (John Webster, Brian Morris ed, 1970) p.135.
10. Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" (English Institute Essays 1948) p.65.
11. Aldous Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth" (Music at Night 1931) p.18.
12. Huxley, op. cit.
13. Cyrus Hoy, The Hyacinth Room (1964) p.220.
14. See especially William Empson, "Double Plots" (Some Versions of Pastoral 1935) pp. 29-74, and also Richard Levin, The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama (1971) pp. 34-48, 53-55.

14A Although some scholars have doubted the Marlovian authorship of some of these scenes.

15. Edward Bond, preface to Lear (1972) p.xiv.
16. R.M. Alden, "The Use of Comic Material in the Tragedy of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries" (JEGP 13, 1914) p.295.
17. G. Wilson Knight, "King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque" (The Wheel of Fire 1930).
18. Samuel Schoenbaum, Middleton's Tragedies (New York 1955) p.24.
And cf Peter Lisca, "The Revenger's Tragedy: A Study in Irony" (PQ 38 1959) pp.242-51.
19. Schoenbaum, op. cit., p.103.
20. Schoenbaum, op. cit., p.130.
21. Roma Gill, "A Reading of The White Devil " (E&S 1966) p.42.
22. Hereward T. Price, "The Function of Imagery in Webster" (PMLA 70, 1955) p.719.
23. See Peter Thomson, "Webster and the Actor" (John Webster, Brian Morris ed, 1970) pp. 39-41 for an account of "Kissing-a figure in action." And the play uses many other significantly repeated words and figures. At l.ii.292 Vittoria defends herself from her mother's attack by quibblingly claiming that only "blood" could have allayed Brachiano's suit to her: in V.vi.240-1 she dies punning on the word - "O my greatest sin lay in my blood./Now my blood pays for't". More trivially, at l.i.36, Flamineo casts around for "Some trick" to separate Camillo and Vittoria: at l.i.194 Camillo is congratulating himself on the "trick" he has used to assert his own authority over his wife. Some stage patterns, too, are repeated. Especially often we are shown people watching others - Cornelia watches the interview of Vittoria and Brachiano, Brachiano watches the murders in dumb-show, Marcello watches the meeting of Flamineo and Lodovico, and so on. In l.i especially the pattern is used significantly. Flamineo proves his superiority by staging a comic scene with Camillo which Brachiano can

- watch, and then by watching Brachiano's meeting with Vittoria. Cornelia, however, turns the tables on him by watching the whole encounter and by bursting in to interrupt them.
24. Ralph Berry, The Art of John Webster (1972) p.111.
 25. See Inga-Stina Ekeblad (Ewbank), "The "Impure Art" of John Webster" (RES 9, 1958) p.264.
 26. See Peter Thomson, op cit, p.38. The "Fury" references are at 1.ii.260 (of Cornelia), 11.i.247 (of Isabella), 111.ii.260 (of Vittoria), V.vi.227 (of Zanche).
 27. See J.R. Brown's edition of The Duchess of Malfi (1964), pp. xli-xlii.
 28. E.M. Waith, "Characterisation in John Fletcher's Tragicomedies" (RES 19, 1943) pp. 141,163.
 29. See H. Bruce Franklin, "The trial scene in Webster's The White Devil in terms of Renaissance Rhetoric" (SEL 1, 1961) p.46 - "Brachiano clearly plays the role of fool...".
 30. Charles Lamb, "A note on" The Arraignment of Vittoria" (The White Devil 111.ii)" (Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets who Lived about the Time of Shakespeare) (John Webster, G.K. and S.K. Hunter eds. 1969) p.56.
 31. B.J. Layman, "The equilibrium of opposites in The White Devil" (PMLA 74, 1959) p.337.
 32. R.F. Whitman, Beyond Melancholy: John Webster and the Tragedy of Darkness (Salzburg 1972) p.112.
 33. See WD 11.i.333-356, 111.ii.187-8, V.vi.30. And cf 1.ii.335-8.
 34. See Malfi 11.ii.74, 11.iii.12, 111.i.18, V.i.14, etc.
 35. Louis ^{D.} Gianetti, "A Contemporary View of The Duchess of Malfi" (Comparative Drama 3, Winter 1969-70) p.302.
 36. J.R. Mulryne, "The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi"

- (Jacobean Theatre, Stratford upon Avon Studies 1, 1960) p.209.
37. Peter Thomson, op. cit., p.41.
 38. See Appendix.
 39. J.R. Mulryne, "The White Devil and the Duchess of Malfi" op. cit, p.207.
 40. Karl Guthke, Modern Tragicomedy (New York 1966) pp. 78-9.
 41. B.J. Layman, op cit. p.336.
 42. The "Franciscans", for instance, who bring Brachiano extreme unction (V.iii.37) are really murderers in the hire of Francisco Duke of Florence.
 43. Malfi III.v. 28-36.
 44. See Appendix.
 45. Roger Warren, "The Duchess of Malfi on the stage" (John Webster, Morris ed. 1970) p.51.
 46. Jane M. Luecke, op cit. p.279.
 47. Ian Scott-Kilvert, John Webster (1964) p.5.
 48. Madeleine Doran, Endeavors of Art (Madison 1954) p.193.

CHAPTER SIX

"But Tragically in Issue": Tragicomedies and *The White Devil*

Webster's introduction to his first independent tragedy *The White Devil* admits that the play had been a box-office failure: it had been acted at the wrong time of year, at the wrong theatre, where the "uncapable multitude" (1.21) had failed to understand the challenging new play and it had lacked "a full and understanding auditory" (1.6). More important, Webster considers the criticism that the play "is no true dramatic poem" (1.13)¹. He admits that the play had dispensed with the classical form of tragedy with "the sententious Chorus .. the passionate and weighty Nuntius..." (1s. 19-20), but he seems to feel that it diverges from a conventional tragic norm in more central ways. Above all, it lacks the singlemindedness of tragedy with its vision of human nobility, and its earnest and lofty tone, "height of style, and gravity of person" (1.18). Webster insists, though, that he has remade the tragic form "willingly, and not ignorantly" (1.15). We must, I think, take seriously Webster's claim to be writing a new and unusual kind of tragedy, a tragedy which reaches its final statement through the language and forms of comedy and tragicomedies.

Critics more recent than that first audience at the Red Bull in 1612 have found Webster's ironic tragedy difficult, and have been puzzled or repelled by the play's unconventional principles of organisation, its use of ironic repetition and

juxtaposition, and especially by the extensive use of comic and tragicomic paraphrase of the central tragic incidents. T.B. Tomlinson insists that the play fails because in it Webster could not relate satire and tragedy and that tragedy and comedy are "very much at odds"². Travis Bogard on the other hand suggests that Webster was a great dramatist precisely because of his ability to present a complex view of life by blending "the two all-but-incompatible ... genres, tragedy and satire"³. In this chapter I wish to investigate ways in which The White Devil orders its clashing genres, and especially their place in the final act with its mediation for the audience between fiction and the return to real life.

As we might expect from the epistle "To the Reader" with its interest in the audience and its place in the process of re-enactment, The White Devil makes important use of the image of the audience. Almost every incident, indeed, becomes loaded with suggestions of fiction and of performance. "Plot", "act" and "auditory", "part" and "revels", are key words in the play⁴. The first meeting of Vittoria and Brachiano is ironically reflected in the tiny drama in which Flamineo gets rid of Camillo while pretending that everything he is doing is for his brother-in-law's benefit. Isabella parodies Brachiano's ceremony of divorce with histrionic thoroughness. Even elsewhere, where there is no deliberate intention of parody, scenes are posed as enacted dramas with performers and audience. The first scene of act two, for instance, develops in a tissue of images from ceremony and enactment. Florence uses Monticelso as his "orator" (11.i.21) in his interview with Brachiano, Brachiano sees the scene as a "triumph" (11.i.82) in which he is the baited lion. Later Brachiano

divorces Isabella in "the latest ceremony" (11.i.193) of his love, Isabella herself performs a "sad ... part" (11.i.225) and sees her loss of Brachiano as "a whore's triumph" (11.i.240).

Even where conscious parody or the language of theatricality are absent, most incidents in the play are observed by an audience. Brachiano and Vittoria watch Flamineo's gulling of Camillo, Flamineo and Zanche watch the love-making of Vittoria and Brachiano, and Cornelia watches them watching. Even the murders of Camillo and Isabella are seen in theatrical terms, dumb shows presented to Brachiano. This device not only limits any sympathy we might have for the suffering victims, but it also places Brachiano, and the faculty of the audience, at the centre of the play. We are never allowed to forget that what we are watching is a play, or what our part in that play is. This constant presentation of audiences, with its suggestion that what we are watching is a theatrical fiction, creates a claustrophobic society in which no act is private or can be divorced from its effect on others. It also provides a partly hostile judgement on the observing faculty of the audience, so that we in the theatre are implicated in the events we are watching: Cornelia's hysterical involvement, Flamineo's satirical and undermining commentary, or Brachiano's aesthetic detachment in the face of murder, are really only extreme forms of our own reactions as audience.

Especially loaded with theatrical references is the arraignment scene: it is even sectioned off with a separate title like a play within the play, a miniature drama which develops in the interaction of performers and audience, the "auditory" (111.ii.15) of ambassadors. The scene is rich in images of acting. Monticelso accuses Vittoria of being a "counterfeit" (111.ii.75).

and suggests that her unsavoury career should have been "play'd a' th' stage" (111.ii.249). Vittoria, however, does not simply allow these theatre references to be used against her. As the verdict is given she stresses the fictive nature of the proceedings by her use of play-quotations. She quotes from Sejanus - "You must have patience/I must first have vengeance" (111.ii.270)⁵ - claiming for herself the high moral character, the noble blood, and the royal husband of the virtuous Agrippina. She alludes to The Atheist's Tragedy - "A rape, a rape ... Yes you have ravished justice" (111.ii.274-5)⁶ - in order to claim the wit and the moral sense, at least in essentials, of the wayward but attractive Sebastian. Both quotations, however, turn against her. Like Agrippina, she is to lose her noble husband, poisoned under mysterious circumstances. And, like Sebastian, she is to be stabbed to death as a result of her adultery.

The first four acts of The White Devil, then, present colliding tones as the central events are modified by ironic commentary and repetition. Moreover, potentially tragic events are also modified by the play's self-conscious theatricality as it presents images of actors and audience, and urges us to judge its fictional action and rhetoric. The world of the first four acts is one where human dignity is precarious, and where pain and death are greeted with laughter or ridicule rather than with tragic emotions of pity or fear. The first scenes of the fifth act continue this view of a tragicomic world, but also move the play towards tragedy.

Tragicomedy in Act Five, Scenes 1 to V of The White Devil

The White Devil falls clearly into two halves, like The

Duchess of Malfi, with the fifth act detached from the earlier part. In the first four acts Brachiano, Vittoria and Flamineo fight a desperate battle against society and the forces of convention: by the opening of Act Five they appear to have achieved their happy ending. The act begins with Flamineo rejoicing in the marriage which has made him "happy" (V.1.3), a word which recalls the first meeting of the lovers where it was repeated and repeated⁷, a scene whose ambiguous feeling was to result in both marriage and murder. In the fifth act Flamineo's happiness, the "great solemnity" (V.1.21) of the wedding celebrations, and Vittoria's "revels" (V.1.53) form an ironic prelude to madness and death.

The first half of the play obtains its detached and analytic effect partly through ironic repetition. In the first scenes of the final act the pressure from this ironic repetition becomes greater as the play falls into more grotesque and more precarious tragicomic forms. Brachiano's murder at barriers recalls, and punishes, the athletic death of Camillo, the poison which attacks Brachiano's "politic brains" (V.iii.163) recalls the poison "deadlier than stibium" (11.i.285) which Flamineo promises to compound for the murder of Isabella, Vittoria's cry that the murder of her husband leaves her "lost for ever" (V.iii.35) recalls Brachiano's sense that in his love for Vittoria he is "quite lost" (1.ii.3), and his fear that if she refused him he would be "lost eternally" (1.ii.208). Finally the parody of extreme unction staged by the "Franciscans" grimly recalls Francisco's nasty suggestion that Brachiano's confessor "with all's absolution" (11.i.69) would never be able to save his soul.

In the final act, too, the frequency of certain kinds of imagery increases. Throughout the play Webster has used what might

be called the imagery of relativity to point out that the situation of the individual profoundly alters the way he sees the world, and that the apprehension of good and evil is essentially subjective. They that have the yellow jaundice think all objects that they look on to be yellow (1.ii.109-10): men at sea think land and trees and ships go the way they go (1.ii.156). In the first four acts images of relativity and of perception are central to the part of Flamineo, the character who realises most clearly the subjective nature of truth. In the fifth act he himself is attacked by these images of relativity. Florence, disguised as a Moor, itself an emblem of the deceptiveness of the senses, ironically repeats Flamineo's cynical view of great men, echoing the idiom of Flamineo himself in order to lull him into a false sense of security - "Ships seem very great upon the river, which show very little upon the seas" (V.i.118-19). A particularly significant image of relativity is that of the sea voyage or shipwreck⁸, which stresses the basic flux and uncertainty of the world of the play: Vittoria, dying, imagines her soul driven, "like to a ship in a black storm" (V.vi.248), to an unknown destination.

The play's relativity too is expressed in the way in which apparently simple evaluative words, "noble", "holy", "charity", "goodness", "penitence", "pity", "honour", take on disquietingly ironic connotations⁹. When, for instance, Cornelia interrupts the meeting of Brachiano and Vittoria, she insists that her daughter and the Duke have lost their "honours" (1.ii.278) by their liaison. Flamineo, worldly-wise, gives a more cynical interpretation to the word. To him it is lacking in "honour" (1.ii.308) to send a Duke home rebuked and without an entourage. In its final act the play continues to make these ironic redefinitions but also, as I shall

show, it attempts to make a more direct use of evaluative words.

The fifth act recalls tragicomedy in its use of ironic repetition, of the imagery of relativity, and of the mechanism of enactment. The first scenes of the final act also contain, like the earlier part of the play, enacted comedies, Zanche's wooing of Mulinassar, or Flamineo's jesting with Giovanni's courtier. The act also contains the play's two included tragicomedies. When Flamineo has murdered his brother, the distracted Cornelia "runs to Flamineo with her knife drawn and coming to him lets it fall" (V.ii.52 SD). This tiny incident takes on the form of a Fletcherian tragicomedy which wants death, but brings Flamineo near it. Finally, as I shall show, Flamineo's mock enactment of his own death also assumes the form of a tiny tragicomedy soon to be cut across by the real violence of the murderous "matachin" (V.vi.169).

"A Tragic Sound": Tragedy in the final act of *The White Devil*.

Although the final scenes of the play include tiny tragicomedies, a more important part of the effect is an attempt to make a new and purer definition of tragedy, a definition which will not be too simple for the complex and disturbing world of the play. When the first four acts use the words "tragedy" or "tragic", they tend to be tinged with mockery or even with open ridicule, as if the people of the play are too small for tragedy. In the second act, the two most obviously tragic incidents, the murders of Isabella and Camillo, are distanced by being presented in dumb show. The pathetic tragedy of Isabella, who generously prevents her retinue from endangering themselves by approaching her, is ironically surrounded by references to comedy: her murderers, for instance, "depart laughing" (11.ii.23 SD). The grotesque murder

of Camillo which follows directly is, equally ironically, surrounded by more conventional tragic trappings: Marcello "laments" (11.ii.37 SD), and the magician stage-manages the scene with "louder music ... a tragic sound" (11.ii.36-7). Comedy and tragedy change places, and in the context of the grotesque murder of Camillo the adjective "tragic" is devalued. When Florence plans his revenge, the only "tragedy" he can imagine as having any validity in the shifting world of the play with its small scale is one with "some idle mirth in't" (1V.i.119).

This ironic view of tragedy colours the first four acts. The fifth act, though, tries to improvise a kind of tragedy which will be able to stand in the slick, clever, detached, ironic, small-scale world of the play. The dying Brachiano, who while he lived was unable to take seriously the sufferings of others, comes to an understanding of the tragic emotions of "pity" and "horror" (V.iii.33-4). The scene becomes coloured by allusions to other tragedies, Florence as Mulinassar seems to be playing the part of Othello, the mad Cornelia with her emblematic flowers recalls Ophelia, Brachiano with his "six grey rats" (V.iii.123), his confusion of "deep sense with folly" (V.iii.75) and his sudden realisation about his own misgovernment, seems to allude directly to the mad Lear. For Brachiano, though, tragic understanding and tragic dignity are precarious. The tragic hero is also a fool who dies distracted and laughing, defeated by the comedy which he himself had insisted on reading into the situations of others.

Brachiano fails to preserve the "affirmation"¹⁰ of tragedy, but Flamineo is more importantly moved on the journey towards tragedy. His feeling that he is "falling to pieces" (V.iv.25) is caused by his sudden exposure to the emotions of

tragedy, so that his ironic detachment is no longer enough. He becomes aware of the pressures of the tragic emotions in the "piteous sight" (V.iv.147) of the dead Marcello and the distracted Cornelia, and the "terrible vision" (V.iv.149) of the ghost of Brachiano. Flamineo continues to be aware of cruel comedy, the wiles of the "Machevillian" (V.iii.193) who "makes you die laughing" (V.iii.196), but he is also now aware of tragedy with its "compassion" (V.iv.115) and terror. The final scene of the play searches for a more certain tragic identity, human dignity secure enough to withstand the critical strength of satire and comedy. The last act is profoundly divided in tone: "happy" (V.i.3) is attacked by the repeated "sad" (V.iii.219, 222, 223, V.iv.50,126), as comedy and tragedy face each other across the play. The final scene of the play is to clarify these conflicting tones, to make simpler and less precarious definitions of tragedy, to free the play from the dangers of fiction and pretence, and to return the audience from the fictional world to their place in the theatre.

"The True Imitation of Life": fiction and reality in the last scene of The White Devil.

The last scene of The White Devil opens with the same kind of ironic double-vision which has been so notable earlier in the play. Flamineo enters to visit Vittoria "'bout worldly business" (V.vi.2), though thirty lines later he has performed a complete volte-face - "Pray thee good woman do not trouble me/With this vain worldly business" (V.vi.31-2). The uneasy alliance of brother and sister has entirely broken down, and they face each other across an unbridgeable void. Flamineo, who has just been exposed to the

emotions of tragedy, and who has just discovered in himself "compassion" (V.iv.115) and "conscience" (V.iv.121), is now painfully divided between genres. Vittoria and Zanche suspect that he is "drunk" (V.vi.4) or "distracted" (V.vi.22): to Vittoria, controlled and dignified, the emotions of tragedy appear disordered and insane.

Flamineo's allegiance to tragedy, though, is still ambiguous. He continues to exercise a tragicomic control of fiction and metaphor by introducing the pistols as "two case of jewels" (V.vi.20). Flamineo's experimentation with the tragic emotions drives Vittoria to readopting the kinds of pretence she had exercised earlier in the play. She appeals to the alliance which has already collapsed - "Is not all mine, yours?" (V.vi.30). Her brother, however, rejects this bid for sympathy and solidarity. He has already changed his mind about the kind of tragedy in which he sees himself involved. He has just suggested that he is an actor in a tragedy of property, "scenes of death and money" ¹¹: now he insists that the situation is that of a tragedy of passion, and that Brachiano had commanded the death of the woman he loved.

The scene, then, increasingly takes on the forms of tragedy, but early in the scene this is undermined by the deliberate pretences in which Flamineo is involved, improvising tragedy in order to see what happens. He laboriously builds up the tragic situation by quoting the dying Brachiano ¹², and by paraphrasing Vittoria's proud statement of independence from the trial scene - "I would not live at any man's entreaty/Nor die at any's bidding" (V.vi.48-9) ¹³.

As the scene disquietingly takes on the forms of tragedy, Vittoria is forced to assume some of Flamineo's control of

fictions as she "seem[s] to consent" (V.vi.73) to his scheme of romantic suicide when her rhetoric fails. Rejecting this rhetoric as only "feminine arguments" (V.vi.69), Flamineo uses a revealing simile:

They move me
As some in pulpits move their auditory,
More with their exclamations than sense
(V.vi.70-2).

The relationship of actor and audience is superimposed on this scene which is moving towards tragedy. We are allotted our roles as "auditory" and urged to mark the "sense" as well as the "exclamations" of this final scene. Moreover although Flamineo is attempting to deny that he is moved by Vittoria's predicament, he in fact admits the opposite. We, like Flamineo, are moved by Vittoria's performance and "exclamations" in spite of our "sense" and moral judgements. We are emotionally engaged, like Flamineo against our will, in the developing tragedy.

In this final scene the image of performer and audience ironically hints that Flamineo is acting out a fictive role, and it suggests a similar course of action to Vittoria and Zanche as a way out of their dangerous situation. Vittoria enters wholeheartedly into the pretence with a heavily emotional speech which is belied by her coldness at the beginning of the scene:

Behold Brachiano, I that while you liv'd
Did make a flaming altar of my heart
To sacrifice unto you; now am ready
To sacrifice heart and all....
(V.vi.83-6).

The fiction of tragedy is poised to lead to the real thing.

The scene defines and reaches tragedy through parody of tragedy. The scene broadens out to include a miniature tragic-comedy, the play's most important suggestion of Fletcherian

tragicomedy. Flamineo acts out his own death, involving us in the "exclamations" but not the "sense" of tragedy. He is brought close to death but does not die, the second time in the act that he is made the centre of a tiny tragicomedy of averted death. He uses tragicomic surprise in the revelation that his apparent death was in fact "a plot" (V.vi.150), and he provides a practical demonstration of Fletcherian tragicomedy which finally rids the play of its ironic slant towards tragicomedy and makes the tragic conclusion possible.

Flamineo's mock-death forms a powerful tragicomic contrast with his coming death. The tragicomic enactment of death purifies the tragic effect of the end of the play. The mock-death is associated with comic and grotesque visions of hell and purgatory ("O Lucian thy ridiculous purgatory ..." V.vi.107-112), pain (V.vi.144 - "There's a plumber laying pipes in my guts ..."), guilt ("Remember/What villainies thou has acted" V.vi.130-1), regret ("Killed with a couple of braches!" V.vi.135), and disorientation ("The way's dark and horrid. I cannot see..." V.vi.138). His real death ironically inverts these expected associations with its images of heaven ("I will carry my own commendations thither" V.vi.197), stoic fortitude in the face of pain ("Search my wound deeper ..." V.vi.238) and sense that the guilt of his life is somehow redeemed by the "goodness" (V.vi.269) of his death. The sense of disorientation, though, is no less profound. The tragic and tragicomic responses to the situation face each other across the scene, complicating our response to the fiction of death, but making its reality surprisingly simple, a victory of courage, control and wit.

In my chapter on A King and No King I suggested that the final tragicomic surprise shatters the established relationship of audience and play. Flamineo's tragicomic surprise, the revelation that his death was simply a "plot" (V.vi.150) has a similar function. Throughout the play we have viewed its incidents largely through Flamineo's eyes. He has had a particularly intimate relationship with the audience, confiding to us his plans, feelings and motives, and criticising for us the rhetoric of the play. He has even stood for the audience, watching Brachiano's wooing of Vittoria or the grief of Cornelia. The surprise implicit in his tragicomic "plot" (V.vi.150) shatters this close relationship with the audience. We are no longer in his confidence, no longer sharing his view of the action, so that the revelation of the "plot", a fine comic moment, marks our growing disengagement from Flamineo and the other characters, a disengagement which predicts the coming ending of the play. In tragedy we might expect our relationship with the central characters to grow more intense as their end approaches: here the growing disengagement of tragicomedy precipitates the tragic ending.

In The White Devil a repeated pattern is that of a serious action, Brachiano's wooing of Vittoria or his divorce of Isabella, followed by its parody, a sign of the precariousness of human dignity and the complexity of the shifting play-world. Here the pattern is reversed, and the enacted play with its perfectly Fletcherian form provides a prelude to tragedy and a means of ridding tragedy of intrusive elements of comedy and tragicomedy. It provides the tragicomic ending which still seems almost possible for the play, but immediately contradicts it with Flamineo's

attempt to revenge himself on Vittoria and the final entrance of the murderers. Parody and tragedy change places, and we are prepared for the tragic ending of the play.

Flamineo's consciously staged fiction of death develops as a tiny play within a play. In comedy and tragicomedy the included play most often appears in the final scene, and its principal function is often to mediate for the audience between the fiction and the workaday world. In The White Devil the included play is treated rather differently. The enacted tragicomedy is confronted not by the return to real life, but by tragedy in earnest with the entry of the murderers. This gives the final murderous action the status of the return to real life, increasing its solidity and our sense of its finality. Tragicomedy is associated with fiction, pretence, and parody: it is tragedy which is seen as sharing the solidity of real life.

The staged tragicomedy finally exorcises fiction and comedy, purifies the final catastrophe by freeing it from intimations of guilt, pain and damnation which it includes in grotesquely comic terms, and it sums up the play's tragicomic elements. It seems now that with the completion of Flamineo's play within a play, and of Vittoria's pretence of affectionate piety, that fiction as well as comedy has finally been abandoned.

Fiction, however, reappears almost immediately, this time to vanish completely. The murderers enter, "Churchmen turned revellers" (V.vi.170) bringing "a masque/A matachin" (V.vi.169). Throughout the play celebration has a disquieting habit of taking on the forms of murder and deception: at the inauguration of the new Pope, Lodovico is confirmed in his murderous intentions, the

celebrations for Vittoria's wedding collapse into "unfortunate revels" (V.iii.8). Here the murderous Masque of Churchmen repeats the play's ironic suggestions that violence and celebration are intimately involved, as the masque leads to murder. As the masquers "throw off their disguises" (V.vi. 172 SD) the play finally abandons fiction. Their entry cuts across the boisterous and amoral tragicomedy of the last scene, and tragicomedy gives place to tragedy for the last time.

Besides dismissing expected allusions to guilt, pain and hell, Flamineo's parodic depiction of murder has a more direct effect on his actual death. It carries over a paradoxical sense of control even into Flamineo's final role as victim. He has already asserted his splendid control even over death, with the result that his murder creates the impression not of guilt-ridden horror like Brachiano's, or of easy pathos like the madness of Cornelia, but of control, "vitality"¹⁴, and the kind of "affirmation"¹⁵ which we associate with the death of the Duchess of Malfi.

The murderers discard their disguises and Flamineo is faced with the reality of murder. His cry, "False keys i' th' court!" (V.vi.168), echoes his exclamation "Strike i' th' court!" (V.i.186) when Cornelia's attack on Zanche sets off a trail of catastrophes. The "court" and the values of great men have failed altogether to give any real safety or security. Flamineo ruefully accepts his defeat: "Fate's a spaniel" (V.vi.177) that cannot be beaten into obedience: violence is ultimately self-defeating. Fortune the "whore" (1.i.4), the controller of the wheel that is actually an instrument of torture (111.iii.94-6), has finally won.

Flamineo has not lost his resilient flippancy:

Let all that do ill, take this precedent:
 Man may his fate foresee, but not prevent.
 And of all axioms this shall win the prize:
 'Tis better to be fortunate than wise.

(V.vi.179-82).

This flippancy, though, does not attack the tragic experience: paradoxically it allows Flamineo to reach the kind of tragic "knowledge" and "affirmation"¹⁶ which allow the heroine of Webster's next tragedy to assert that even in the face of death she remains "Duchess of Malfi still" (Malfi 1V.ii.142). Flamineo has made the self-assessment so often associated with the tragic conclusion: he admits that he is one of those "that do ill" (V.vi.179). Unlike Brachiano, though, he is not crushed by a sense of guilt. He remains resolutely himself.

As Flamineo achieves this tragic self-assertion, Vittoria too is surrounded by the tragic emotions, "pity" (V.vi.183) and "fear" (V.vi.222). Zanche simply insists on her own courage - "I shall ne'er look pale" (V.vi.230-1). For Flamineo and Vittoria the effect is more complicated, and each reaches tragic self-assertion at least partly through wit and black humour - "'Twas a manly blow -/The next thou giv'st, murder some sucking infant, /And then thou wilt be famous ..." (V.vi.232-4).

The wit and control of the victims still dominates this final scene. Lodovico recalls his last meeting with Flamineo - "Sirrah you did strike me once ..." (V.vi.190), a meeting which was surrounded by persistent imagery of laughter. Flamineo echoes this self-assertive, self-mocking laughter, almost the play's last use of the language of comedy. Lodovico is nonplussed. "Dost laugh?" (V.vi.194) he asks. For the second time in the scene

Flamineo compares death with conception and birth¹⁷ - "Wouldst have me die, as I was born, in whining?" (V.vi.195). The images of mad laughter which surrounded Brachiano's death helped to destroy the precarious tragic effect: Flamineo, and to a lesser extent Vittoria, express the tragic "affirmation" with its control and self-assertion partly in terms of purposive flippancy and the image of laughter.

Lodovico and the other murderers are as interested in the process of dying as their victims. Indeed they seem to have no individuality at all except that which they express through their victims. By placing Lodovico, really rather a minor character, at the centre of this scene and by telling us so little about him Webster ensures that it is his victims who continue to interest and engage us. As Flamineo wishes the ghost of Brachiano to tell him about life after death, Lodovico wishes to learn from his victims about the physical and psychological processes of death. "What dost think on?" (V.vi.201) he asks Flamineo. Flamineo deliberately shuts off past and future: there are no more references now to the play's past, which Flamineo has deliberately abandoned: "I remember nothing" (V.vi.204).

As well as its fictional past, the play also retreats from language. The whole play, indeed, has treated sceptically its own rhetoric. The linguistic excesses of the lawyer in the trial scene cast doubts on Monticelso's, and on Vittoria's, less grotesque rhetoric. Even in the final act Zanche's intention to speak to Mulinassar "in our own language" (V.i.96) suggests, for a moment, that Florence's disguise might be discovered and disaster averted, but again language fails and there is no further

mention of the plan. In this final scene language seems to have become altogether untrustworthy. In the face of the "long silence" (V.vi.203) of death words are meaningless, "to prate were idle" (V.vi.204). The past, memories, and even the power of language are all reduced to "nothing" (V.vi.204,205) when confronted by the facts of death. Nothing matters outside the present moment. Finally moral reservations, the desperate attempt to gain security, and even "man's own thoughts" (V.vi.206) are only "infinite vexation" (V.vi.205). Like the death of the Duchess of Malfi, the centre of this scene is poised in slow motion with the intensity and the control of tragedy.

Flamineo abandons past and future, memory and speculation, to concentrate on the present precarious moment. Vittoria is not so willing to abandon the outside world and her achievement of tragedy is more difficult. She tries to save herself by using her feminine wiles on the murderers, and only when this is obviously futile does she adopt the courage and witty defiance of her brother. Like Flamineo's, her death is surrounded by images of disorientation - "My soul, like to a ship in a black storm/Is driven I know not whither ..." (V.vi.248-9). Unlike Flamineo, though, she accepts the rather superficial moral judgements of society, rejecting the values of the "court" (V.vi.261) and the "great man" (V.vi.262) and accepting that "my greatest sin lay in my blood./Now my blood pays for't" (V.vi.240-1). Flamineo continues to probe and to question these moral judgements. He finally accepts Vittoria and claims to "love" (V.vi.242) her, and insists that "many glorious women" who had a reputation for "masculine virtue" had in fact been "vicious" (V.vi.244-5): Vittoria's own vibrant femininity at least had its integrity and its lack of hypocrisy.

Flamineo and Vittoria through their wit, courage and self-awareness make the tragic "affirmation ... of the dignity of the human spirit"¹⁸ not achieved by the virtuous Leonora or Marcello, or by the passionate Brachiano. Vittoria concentrates on her own sense of sin. Flamineo refuses to explain himself by any moral code. He concentrates on an understanding of his own self.

I do not look
Who went before, nor who shall follow me:
No, at myself I will begin and end ...
(V.vi.256-8).

The Duchess of Malfi dies reaching out towards heaven, Vittoria tentatively accepts the validity of a moral code she had broken. Flamineo rejects this conventional consolation. Moral teaching or divine revelation confuses rather than clarifies our view of life - "While we look up to heaven, we confound/Knowledge with knowledge: O I am in a mist" (V.vi.259-60). Flamineo's affirmation is achieved not through discovering a meaning in pain and suffering, but by accepting, entirely without illusion, that there is no meaning. Suffering seems to carry within it its own affirmation. Seas "laugh" (V.vi.251) in storms, and

We cease to grieve, cease to be Fortune's slaves,
Nay cease to die by dying
(V.vi.252-3).

Flamineo unlike Vittoria attempts to remake the moral absolutes. He recognises himself as one of those who "do ill" (V.vi.179) and admits that his life was "a black charnel" (V.vi.270), but he also suggests that the quality of his life was redeemed by the "goodness" (V.vi.269) of his death. Finally the moral clichés of society do not count: in this dangerous world without absolutes the closest we can get to "goodness" is wit, courage, control and lack of illusion. Like the innocent Duchess of Malfi, Flamineo

the materialistic murderer preserves the status of a tragic hero by insisting on his own "goodness", courage, and awareness.

Finally, like the Duchess of Malfi, Flamineo turns resolutely towards death, welcoming "rest" from the "busy trade of life" in a world "where all seek pain by pain" (V.vi.273-4). Like the Duchess, Flamineo defeats reductive images of comedy and satire by using himself pointed jests and puns to insist upon his own power¹⁹. He laments that he has caught "an everlasting cold" (V.vi.271), and he puns on his own name to describe his death as like "a spent taper" (V.vi.263). In The Duchess of Malfi the Duchess reaches tragedy by opposing the reductive forces of satire and tragicomedy. In The White Devil Flamineo achieves a tragic affirmation at least partly through his critical flippancy, wit, and comedy.

However the play does not end with Flamineo's achievement of tragedy by using the opposing genres of comedy and tragicomedy. A more conventional and reductive expression of justice is to follow, a cooler, more detached, comment on the passions and self-absorption of tragedy. Just as Lodovico surprised Vittoria and her brother, the murderers are in their turn surprised by the representatives of law and order. The English Ambassador, who has previously represented the audience and moderation, brings about this final reordering and keeps back the young prince Giovanni from the violent scene. For the third time in the play the young prince is protected from violence and horror: we are reminded of the murder of Isabella, and of the murder of Brachiano, two events which started the series of cause and effect which leads to the tragic conclusion. Giovanni remains aloof and uninvolved: the play moves from the passionate individuality of

tragedy to a more ordered, less dangerous, and less heroic world.

Like the dying Flamineo, the captured Lodovico asserts his proud self-sufficiency and insists on the irrelevancy of society's moral judgements: what he has committed in a "most noble deed" (V.vi.280). He insists that he had acted, indirectly, on Giovanni's own authority, a disturbing undermining of the play's final establishment of order. Giovanni as the voice of conventional morality refuses the implied blame, insisting on his own right and ability to dispense "justice" (V.vi.292). Lodovico though refuses to accept the validity of this justice. He refuses to deny anything but glories in his "act" (V.vi.293), the "night-piece" (V.vi.297) which was his "best" (V.vi.297), and which he hardly sees as a moral act at all.

Flamineo welcomed "rest" from a world of "pain" (V.vi.274): Lodovico finds "rest" (V.vi.296) even in the face of torture and death, in his own anarchic achievement, the final assertion of his own will. The White Devil presents a number of near-tragedies in which the tragic experience is fragmented. Lodovico asserts only a callous indifference to the pain of others or to his own. Isabella's death shows only her generous disinterest, Marcello's only his predestined role as victim in a predatory world, Brachiano's only mad terror and despair. In the play only Flamineo and Vittoria precariously hold on to tragedy, and after their deaths tragic stability falls apart into irony and oppressive conventionality.

In a play in which order and hierarchy have themselves been seen as threatening, where great men have been seen as "violent thunder" (1.i.11), as wolves (1.i.8), as devils (1V.ii.59), and as a "whirlpool" (1V.ii.70), there is small comfort in

the restoration of order. The young Giovanni, it is suggested, may be one of these predatory great men in embryo: Flamineo had suggested that his "long tallants ... will grow out in time" (V.iv.8-9). His conventional appeal to "justice" (V.vi.292) rings slightly hollow after Flamineo's redefinition of the word in the context of his planned murder of Vittoria (V.vi.175). Flamineo's previous description of Giovanni's character, Lodovico's assignment of blame to him and his refusal to accept the young prince's idea of justice, and Giovanni's use of discredited moral cliches, all serve to qualify ironically this restoration of order. In the face of death there is little to choose between the murderer and adulteress, the brutal stage-manager of the bloody "night-piece", and the innocent young prince whose idea of justice seems limited to torture and execution.

Conclusion

The final act of The White Devil stages a series of tiny dramas, especially tragicomic dramas - Cornelia's attack on Flamineo, Flamineo's mock-death, the murderous Masque of Churchmen - tiny fictions which disturbingly turn into fact. The audience is presented with images of itself as Vittoria and Zanche watch Flamineo's performance, or the three watch Lodovico's masque. The audience, though, is intimately involved in the performances, as Vittoria and Zanche run to tread on Flamineo, or the masque turns on its audience. The audience in the theatre is reminded of the fictional form of the whole entertainment, but also that it is, like real life, uncomfortably liable to implicate and to turn against its audience. We cannot escape its disturbing

vision by telling ourselves that it is only a fiction.

Webster's introduction to The White Devil stresses the unconventional form of his tragedy, which he fears may be "no true dramatic poem" (1.13). It uses more extensively than any of Webster's other plays the language of comedy: most of its events are surrounded by ironic commentary, parody, laughter, and images of theatricality. The play establishes a series of double-visions where death and laughter, tragedy and comedy, are brought into the closest possible proximity. The final scene opens with this kind of tragicomic double-vision as Flamineo acts out a grotesque fictional form of his own death. This serves, however, to purify his murder from these disturbing images of tragicomedie and to give his death the solidity and conviction of the return to real life which follows the end of the enacted fiction. The first four and a half acts of the play use tragicomedie, but it is "tragicall in issue"²⁰. In the final act the structures of tragedy, with "pity" (V.vi.183) and "fear" (V.vi.222), self-assertion and affirmation, spring out of the tragicomic context of the play with its fragmented images of tragedy, the most comforting thing in a disturbing and uncomfortable play. In the dangerous, shifting world of the play, however, tragedy is precarious, and the scene slips back into irony and callous violence. In The White Devil a difficult tragicomic world finally, after a number of false starts, reaches tragedy. In Webster's next play The Duchess of Malfi tragedy is again achieved, but the play is more interested in the aftermath of tragedy and the failure of tragedy in a world without a centre.

NOTES

1. Despite the fact that "To the Reader" is one of the most useful documents for gauging Webster's attitude to his own work, it nonetheless alludes closely to Ben Jonson's apology for his own unconventional and ironic tragedy Sejanus. Jonson for instance writes:- "If it be objected, that what I publish is no true Poëme; in the strict Lawes of Time. I confesse it: as also in the want of a proper Chorus ..." ("To the Readers" ls 5ff).
2. T.B. Tomlinson, A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy (1964), p.229.
3. Travis Bogard, John Webster's Tragic Satire (NY 1955), p.5.
4. "Plot" - V.vi.150
 "Act" at V.vi.294, "acted" at l.i.31, V.vi.131.
 "Auditory" at lll.ii.15, V.vi.70.
 "Perform" at ll.i.225.
 "Part" at ll.i.225.
 "Revels" at l.ii.80, V.i.53, V.iii.8.
5. Cf. Sejanus lV.1-2 "You must have patience, royal Aggripina. /I must have vengeance first."
6. Cf. The Atheist's Tragedy l.iv.123-6 "A rape, a rape, a rape!... why, what is't but a rape to force a wench/To marry?"
7. The White Devil l.ii.6, 10, 16, 205.
8. The White Devil l.ii.52-4, 156-9, lll.ii.82, V.i.176-9, etc.
9. "Noble" V.vi.120, lll.ii.54.
 "Merciful" l.i.57.
 "Holy" lll.ii.77.
 "Charity" lll.ii.161, 70.
 "Goodness" V.vi.269.
 "Justice" V.vi.175.

- "Penitence" V.iii.252.
- "Pity" V.vi.183.
- "Honour" 1.ii.308.
- "Virtue" 1.i.50.
10. Dorothea Krook, Elements of Tragedy (New Haven 1969), pp.8-9.
 11. Subtitle to Edward Bond's Bingo (1974).
 12. Not only by inventing what is presumably a fictional account of Brachiano's manifesto, but also by calling Vittoria a "good woman" (V.vi.31 - cf V.iii.17).
 13. Cf. WD 111.ii.138-9. "I scorn to hold my life/At yours or any man's entreaty..."
 14. Robert Heilman, Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience (Washington 1968), p.198.
 15. Krook, op. cit.
 16. Krook, op. cit.
 17. Cf. V.vi.52-3 - "Do you mean to die indeed? - With as much pleasure/As e'er my father gat me".
 18. Krook, op. cit.
 19. Cf. The Duchess of Malfi 1V.ii.226-7 - "I would fain put off my last woman's fault,/I'd not be tedious to you."
 20. John Ford, The Broken Heart (111.v.19).

CHAPTER SEVEN

"More Art, then Deathes Cathedrall Palaces":
the tragicomic unity of The Duchess of Malfi.

The failure of The White Devil seems to have caused Webster to re-evaluate his own view of tragedy and of its relationship with other dramatic genres. The earlier play is centred on ambiguous heroes, a witty murderer, an adulterer and adultress: the later is focused on more obviously tragic characters, a kindly woman who trusts in the validity of her own passions, her madly jealous brother, a malcontent torn between his hopes of personal advancement and his painfully clear moral vision. The White Devil from the beginning introduces tragicomic incidents, discords, and the modifying use of laughter: the later play seems to begin as a tragedy of passion and keeps this obviously tragic framework up to the death of the Duchess, and only then confronts tragedy with satire, tragicomedy, and a distorted view of the absolutes of tragedy. Finally, while The White Devil uses comedy and tragicomedy to reach a tragic conclusion, The Duchess of Malfi juxtaposes tragedy and its negation, a view of things which even the ordered frame of tragedy cannot subdue, so that the Cardinal and Ferdinand die surrounded by savage comedy.

When The Duchess of Malfi was written in about 1613, attitudes towards tragedy were beginning to change: in play after play of the period the affirmation of tragedy is treated sourly, is diluted in satire and tragicomedy, or is rejected altogether. This change seems to have been complete by 1681 when Nahum Tate

staged his revised version of King Lear. Here tragedy is abandoned altogether in favour of tragicomedy. The Fool, and Lear's more extreme visions of destruction and depravity, are cut, Edgar and Cordelia are made lovers, the old king and Cordelia are finally rescued, and a factitious moral ending is imported, "that Truth and Vertue shall at last succeed"¹. Tate's excuse for this rewriting shows how completely taste had turned against tragedy - "Otherwise I must have uncumbered the Stage with dead Bodies, which Conduct makes many tragedies conclude with unseasonable Jests ..." ². Webster, while retaining the tragic framework of aspiration, defeat and death, is aware of the possibility of compromising the tragic ending with "unseasonable Jests", and in The Duchess of Malfi this negation of tragedy becomes an essential part of the tragic effect. Webster thus takes an important part in the Jacobean reaction against tragedy, finding new ways of expressing the tragic emotions of pity and terror and yet exploiting the pointed irony of "Jests" at the tragic conclusion. It is largely its ironic version of tragedy which has caused critics so much uncertainty about the unity of the play. William Archer found it "broken-backed"³, J.R. Mulryne writes of the "agreed failure" of the play's fifth act⁴, and Ian Scott-Kilvert finds it an "anti-climax" which is "fatal to the unity of the play"⁵: other critics have described it as a play whose tragic integrity is destroyed by "comic and satiric confusion"⁶, or even as a "comitragedy"⁷.

"Sportive action" and "action indeed": Malfi and the unity of judgement.

Despite its obvious comic and satiric elements, the first four acts of The Duchess of Malfi suggest a kind of tragedy more

orthodox in form than the tragicomic double-takes of The White Devil. One of the factors which contributes most strikingly to this tragic framework is the play's comparative unity of judgement. Even the Duchess' second marriage is surrounded by ambiguity only because of the way it is judged by her imperfect society, and more subtly because Antonio never quite lives up to the demands which the relationship make on him. Otherwise the relationship seems simply strong and valuable, and the Duchess' motherhood is a potent symbol in the play's sterile society. Her fruitful defiance of fixed order perfects her, and the fact that she is forced into assuming "masks and curtains" (111.ii.159) seems to be considered not as a moral flaw in the marital relationship, but rather a function of the corrupt society in which she is trapped.

An important part of the play's unity of judgement lies in its definition of action. "Action" is a vitally important word in The Duchess of Malfi, and especially in the first act, which includes complex discussion of action and inaction. The word itself is a rich and ambiguous one which Webster uses punningly throughout the play: Louis D. Gianetti has pointed out that "the concepts of 'action' and 'actor' are multifold in the play"⁸. In the first scene, inactivity is felt as an important threat to the framework of society. Antonio realises that Bosola's discontent is due to "want of action" (1.i.80), and the same is true of Ferdinand, whose boredom and unchannelled energy add terrible intensity to his murderous rage against his sister. In the first act Ferdinand defines his own role in the crucial antithesis of "sportive action" and "action indeed" (1.i.91). Throughout the play "sportive action", games of horsemanship at which Antonio excels but which are simply games, is set against "action indeed",

that commitment to real action and experience which the Duchess so triumphantly and disastrously follows and which Ferdinand so entirely lacks⁹.

Antonio's opening characters of the Aragonian brethren and the Duchess also turn on a juxtaposition of real and sportive action. The Cardinal seems to be a man of action - "tennis, dance/Court ladies ... single combat ..." (1.i.154-5), but these prove to be superficial, "form" only (1.i.156), masking the frigid inactivity of his "inward character" of "melancholy churchman" (1.i.157). Ferdinand seems not to be a man of action: he seems to "sleep o' th' bench" (1.i.174), but this is simply a camouflage to entrap the unwary. However although this appearance of inactivity is deceptive, he is curiously detached from ordinary experience. He lives vicariously: "He speaks with others' tongues, and hears men's suits/With others' ears..." (1.i.173-4). He is distanced from real experience, trapped in sportive action, playing games of oneupmanship with his courtiers and indulging in aggressive laughter. He is especially distanced from sexuality. The Cardinal has a mistress: Ferdinand makes bawdy jokes and then disclaims their bawdiness. His confrontation with direct sexual experience when he learns of his sister's marriage and motherhood terrifies and disgusts him, filling him with blind anger, "a kind of pity" (11.v.27) and a perverse sense of guilt. However even in the grip of this powerful emotion he is unable to act: he "sleep[s]" (11.v.76) for at least two years, and when in the boudoir scene he has the opportunity to discover the identity of his sister's lover he refuses to take it. Finally when the Duchess is in his power he falls back on "sportive action", hiring other men to torment and kill her, determining to have her "plagu'd in

art" (1V.i.111) and arranging her torture with unreal stage props, "presentations ... fram'd in wax" (1V.i.112). Despite his claim to want "action indeed", Ferdinand's most intense emotions and most characteristic deeds are surrounded by images of pretence and fiction.

Ferdinand who both desires and fears real experience reacts violently and ambiguously to the death of his sister. He feels a sudden shattering sense of identity with the Duchess - "She and I were twins ..." (1V.ii.267), and he retreats from this direct experience into blaming Bosola, suggesting a fictional happy ending (1V.ii.273-8) and falling back on blatantly fictional explanations of his action, his hope to gain "an infinite mass of treasure" (1V.ii.285) by her death. He insists on seeing even the death of the Duchess as a kind of fiction - "as we observe in tragedies/That a good actor many times is curs'd/For playing a villain's part ..." (1V.ii.288-90). Finally he retreats into sterile repetition of the past, commanding Bosola "Never look upon me more" (1V.ii.317), as he had previously told his sister "I will never see you more" (111.ii.136). This confrontation of Ferdinand with real feeling and real commitment, "action indeed" might have been redemptive: however it drives him into madness, so that sportive action becomes all that he is capable of. In his distraction he imagines himself a wolf and a soldier in battle, both ironic images of "action indeed" which slip over into threatening unreality.

The Cardinal too shrinks from action indeed to sportive action: even his commitment to action in becoming a soldier is undercut by being expressed only in dumb show so that it too appears as a form of sportive action. He dies as "a little point, a kind

of nothing" (V.v.79), his murder a direct result of a grotesque comedy which he himself sets up. Even Antonio is divided between real and vicarious experience. He praises "noble action" (l.i. 146), but his attempts at real action are either too late, like his wish that Ferdinand would return in the boudoir scene, or disastrous miscalculations, like his final attempt to confront the Cardinal. It is at "sportive action", games, enacted comedies or private jokes, that he excels.

Of all the play's characters only the Duchess, and more ambiguously Bosola, have or develop a commitment to "action indeed". Early in the play she chooses to commit herself to "almost impossible actions" (l.i.346) by wooing Antonio: later she argues that man's virtue lies not in his rank but in his "own actions" (lll.v.120). She rejects various kinds of sportive action, "vain ceremony" (l.i.456), the "masks and curtains" (lll. ii.159) which her commitment to real action ironically compels her to assume. Her wooing of Antonio, and her motherhood, are the play's most forceful images of "action indeed" in a sterile society wasting itself in games and cruel jokes. Even in the scenes of her torture and murder her vibrant singlemindedness enables her to insist on her commitment to real experience and to defeat the images of fiction, "sportive action", with which Ferdinand attacks her.

"To behold my tragedy": tragedy in the first four acts of
The Duchess of Malfi.

The Duchess of Malfi differs from Webster's earlier ironic tragedy in the coherence of its moral judgements, its

complex discussion of real and vicarious action, and a more hostile treatment of fiction and of comedy. The play's first four acts also invoke the authority of tragedy more directly. As early as the end of the first act, Cariola defines the play as a tragedy: to her, the Duchess' wooing of her steward seems a "fearful madness" which deserves "pity" (1.i.506). Tragic pity and terror also shape the tender scene of wooing, which is already heavy with ominous suggestions of death and madness. As the play progresses, the tragic emotions become more pressing and inescapable. In Act 1V the Duchess' torment is poised as a formal "tragedy" (1V.ii.8, 36, 288), scripted by Ferdinand, enacted by Bosola and centreing on the Duchess, and developing in the Aristotelian combination of "pity" (1V.i.88, 90, 95, 138, 1V.ii.34, 259, 273, 347)¹⁰ and "terror" (1V.ii.189).

Even this tragic centre of the play is menaced by bitter comedy and by images of fiction which the Duchess must oppose with her own tragic consciousness and her sense of her own identity. Bosola's disguises, Ferdinand's equivocating vow, Cariola's desperate attempt to escape death by the use of fictions, the "feign'd statues" of Antonio and his son (1V.ii.351), the "tedious theatre" (1V.i.84), the "good actor" playing a "villain's part" (1V.ii.289-90), all these create a pervasive sense of unreality which can only be defeated by the Duchess' acceptance of tragedy and her refusal to compromise her sense of self, so intimately connected with her relationship with her husband and children. As well as "sportive action" and the figurative mode, the death of the Duchess resists the scene's bitter comedy and tragicomedy, the grotesque masque of madmen, Ferdinand's grim comedy with the dead man's hand. This latter scene is filled with bawdy and

and threatening double-meanings, and is an enacted comedy which seems to turn into an enacted tragedy with the appearance of the "sad spectacle" (1V.i.57) of the supposedly murdered Antonio: our view of the scene, and the view of the Duchess, teeter disquietingly between fact and fiction. As well as the temporarily uncertain movement between fact and fiction, the even tragic current is also disturbed by the suggestion of earlier scenes¹¹. These recollections of a happy past, with its fictional suggestions of a happy future, form a poignant counterpart to this scene of torment and separation: the central incident is surrounded by suggestions of married happiness and of the death of loved ones, both of which turn out to be fictional.

In the fourth act the Duchess is posed at the centre of this self-conscious tragedy, both tragic heroine and the butt of Ferdinand's grim practical joke, surrounded by images of theatre, satire, and comedy. Although she preserves her own, and our, sense of her as a tragic heroine, she has an ambiguous relationship to some of the absolutes which we might expect tragedy to affirm. She chooses not to "pray" but rather to "curse the stars", and the world into "chaos" (1V.i.95-9). Throughout the play the Duchess has appeared as spokesman for fruitful disorder by rejecting "vain ceremony" (1.i.456), the traditional role of the nobility, and the traditionally passive role of women: she is contrasted with Antonio whose conventional admiration for "fixed order" (1.i.6) is only abandoned as he dies. Here for a moment the Duchess' acceptance of fruitful disorder almost slips over into the will towards general destruction, but finally she dies in "obedience" and humility (1V.ii.169), insisting on her own awareness and understanding, "well awake" (1V.ii.224).

The menacing sense of theatricality and the power of satirical comedy are most fully expressed in the masque of madmen. The masque underlines the strangeness of the audience's experience of tragedy, the ambiguous status of an entertainment derived from watching the sufferings of others. This second scene of the Duchess' torment opens almost in the language of satirical tragic-comedy with a "hideous noise" (1V.ii.1) similar to that which introduces Malevole in Marston's The Malcontent: the Duchess' ability to use discord positively enables her to use this bitter comedy to keep her "in her right wits" (1V.ii.6). The grotesque masque shares some of the functions of Flamineo's mock-death in The White Devil. Both introduce a tragicomic disturbance of the tragic current, both externalise and exorcise certain anti-tragic impulses, so that Flamineo's real death is freed from ideas of pain, guilt and damnation, and the Duchess is freed from madness and is detached from the world of the play around her, which is becoming ever more grotesque.

At the same time the masque detaches us as audience from the play-world by presenting this distorted version of it, so that a change in the audience-play relationship which is to be complete by the fifth act is already beginning. The masque and its characters provide a distorted image of the world of the play, and some of the madmen reflect quite accurately some of the play's central characters¹². The Third Madman (1V.ii.80-1, 91-2, 96-7, 104) clearly recalls the Cardinal, the corrupt sensual churchman: the fourth, the mad doctor, seems to represent Ferdinand, who imagined himself as a physician treating the "intemperate agues" (1V.i.142) of the Duchess, who sent her the grim masque as a "cure" (1V.ii.43), and who finally needs a doctor

himself and admits that "physicians are like kings" (V.ii.66). Perhaps the Second Madman (77-9, perhaps discussed in 101-3) is a distorted version of Bosola, the man who "shows the tombs" (1V.ii.102) and indulges in scurrilous and misogynistic stories of "the glass-house" (1V.ii.77 - cf 11.ii.7). The masque, then, as well as presenting an attack on the Duchess' tragic commitment by the forces of satire also genuinely helps to keep her in her right wits by asserting her essential sanity in the face of the grotesque madness of her opponents, Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosola.

The ending of the masque with its discordant music, dialogue in which no communication is made, and its ever more extreme vision of physical and spiritual degradation, predicts the end of horrors and the end of the play itself: the Duchess' assumption, and completion, of the role of audience, directs us and prepares us for the ending of our capacity as observers. This image of ending is immediately followed by the reappearance of fiction in Bosola's disguise as an old man and his adoption of various shifting identities: fiction, rejected by the Duchess, reappears now and after her death to menace the society she leaves behind. The relationship of the supporters of real and of sportive action, of victim and tormentor, at this point in the play is complex. Intimate links of unexpected strength are drawn between the two, so that Bosola appears as ally as well as enemy, helping the Duchess to make her final affirmation as well as tempting her to abandon it. The Duchess at first believed that the disguised Bosola was "mad too" (1V.ii.114), as Cariola had previously seen her as "like a madman" (1V.ii.17): similarly she compares her suffering to that of "the tann'd galley-slave" (1V.ii.28), and we

recall that Bosola had served a sentence in the galleys for a murder commissioned by the Cardinal (1.i.71-3). Bosola resembles the Duchess, as he resembles Antonio, and the scene provides him as well as the tormented woman with a momentous decision which, as I shall suggest, he meets only partially.

Bosola's grimly satiric and reductive view of life, then, enables the Duchess to make her own tragic affirmation. She opposes Bosola's superficial definitions of her and attempts to define herself through questions - "Dost know me? ... Who am I?... Am I not thy Duchess?" (1V.ii.121-3, 134). The structure of the scene, with its tissue of question and answer and its colliding definitions, recalls the wooing scene, and with this firm reminder of her commitment to real experience she refuses to accept Bosola's picture of an aging, profligate woman as at all appropriate to her. Like the wooing scene, the scene culminates in the Duchess' acceptance of her own womanhood, and her insistence on her own power - "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (1V.ii.142)¹³.

Although menaced by fiction and satire, the Duchess achieves a tragic integrity, insisting on her own identity even as she dies. At the same time she is a tragic heroine, using suffering to achieve a new insight into the value of life, and the heroine of a tragical comedy, like R.B.'s Virginia, achieving a spiritual victory and escaping from tragedy into a heavenly afterlife¹⁴. After her death the posed tragedy disintegrates, and tragedy is parodied in the high-spirited fight for life of Cariola. She creates a tissue of fictions - "I am quick with child" (1V.ii.254) - which Bosola clear-sightedly recognises as fictions. Like her mistress, Cariola is driven into subterfuge, taking shameful ways to avoid shame: unlike her mistress, she

cannot free herself from fiction as she dies, and the only kind of love and motherhood she can claim for herself exist in fiction only.

The tragic effect of the death of the Duchess is modified not only by the unexpected continuation of the play beyond tragedy, but also by the events which immediately follow it. The return from tragedy is illustrated in several small inversions or parodies of tragedy, beginning with the murder of Cariola. Throughout this penultimate act a complex system of enacted dramas with their audiences has been created: Ferdinand watches Bosola watching the Duchess watching the madmen. The masque of madmen detaches us as audience from the play-world, and after the death of the Duchess we move further away from the other characters of the play so that we view them in a new detached and objective way. The fourth act is a bewildering alternation of detachment and painful involvement: our involvement with the Duchess is increased by temporarily seeing her adopt our own role as audience. After this we become increasingly detached and withdrawn from the play's characters, until we can give full weight to the play's ironic and ambiguous conclusion.

At the murder of the Duchess, only Ferdinand retains the status of delegate of the audience, so that we are forced to see even our own position as observers as complex and ambivalent. His reaction to the death of his sister is a perversion of the tragic catharsis experienced by the audience. He first denies (1V.ii. 259) and then accepts (1V.ii.273) the validity of tragic "pity", sees the event as one of "horror" (1V.ii.311,314) and interprets the whole as a "tragedy" (1V.ii.288). However for Ferdinand pity and horror are not purged: they are violently awakened, and he

rushes out "distracted" (1V.ii.336). This inversion of catharsis brings Ferdinand to the reverse of tragic knowledge: he tries to throw all the blame on Bosola, to imagine a fictional happy ending, and to retreat into obviously false motives and images of fiction.

At this point, with Ferdinand rejecting and Bosola struggling with tragic understanding, in another inversion of tragedy the Duchess revives for a moment. This almost reduces what has gone before into an enacted tragicomedy of averted danger, but this structure is fragmented, and the revival is momentary only. For Bosola, this rich confusion of tragedy and tragicomedy poses insoluble problems: even the tragic emotions are confused, as it seems that "pity would destroy pity" (1V.ii.347). Finally Bosola too is faced with divided loyalties to fact and fiction, and he presents the dying Duchess with a curious blend of truth and falsehood, a half-real, half-unreal picture of Antonio alive and peacefully reconciled with the brothers. Bosola's confrontation with tragic knowledge leaves him still prepared to use fictions, and however kindly his motives this deliberate falsehood suggests that Bosola's dependence on fiction and pretence is to shape his actions even now that he has rejected "painted honour" (V.ii.336).

As Ferdinand retreats from tragic knowledge, Bosola accepts it in modified form, throwing off his disguise. This assumption of tragic knowledge, like his commitment to the values represented by the dead Duchess, is complex and ambiguous. His change of direction is achieved only when he is convinced that he has lost his chance for reward, so that it has a marked undercurrent of selfishness and personal spite, a change in attitude which does not seem to affect much the way he acts but only the people who are his friends and enemies. This new tragic knowledge,

too, does not prevent his using fictions. To see Bosola's move to the Duchess side only in terms of "a profound change", a new commitment "to doing what he knows is morally right"¹⁵ seems to me to oversimplify. It is a strange kind of conversion which is only second choice to material advancement, and which leads to much the same kind of murder and betrayal as were committed by his unregenerate self. Moreover the "profound change" in Bosola is not wholly for the good: it expresses itself not only in a discovery of his own "guilty conscience" (1V.ii.356) reminiscent of that of the Cardinal, but also in a significant dimming of his clear moral insight. Before this he has always showed clear moral understanding even when this was rigorously excluded from his actions. From this point he no longer stands in a special relationship to the audience, he is less self-critical, and we can accept his evaluations less readily. His vow, for instance, to give the body of the Duchess to "some good women" (1V.ii.372) is made apparently without irony, although he has just participated in the murder of the play's two good women. Bosola, as he himself would have been the first to realise earlier in the play, returns as arrant knave as he set forth, because he carried himself always along with him.

The fourth act of The Duchess of Malfi, then, presents a tragedy in which a good woman reaches tragic knowledge and affirmation, conquers the reductive satiric interpretation of her life and achieves self-definition and even victory in the face of death, like the heroine of a tragical comedy. This tragic centre, however, is surrounded by a masque which provides a grotesquely distorted view of the play itself, a parody of the tragic moment as Cariola refuses tragic knowledge and affirmation and Ferdinand

tragic catharsis, a miniature tragicomedy as the Duchess momentarily revives and a staged comedy, a grim practical joke as Ferdinand leaves the Duchess a dead man's hand and reveals the effigy of Antonio. The act tries to suggest as richly as possible the variety of human reactions to disaster without compromising the centrality of the Duchess' positive statement. For the strong few there is the possibility of genuine tragedy or the tragicomedy of spiritual victory: for the majority there is only uncertainty, ambiguity, or the rejection of the difficult absolutes of tragedy. As the act ends, Bosola steps into the place of the main - indeed now almost the only - mediator between the audience and the play, although we must be careful about accepting any of his evaluations of his own actions. There is never any doubt about the Duchess' courage and essential innocence, and the fact that victory is hers: the play's central ambiguities lie rather in the effect of her love and death on those around her. The Duchess' tragic knowledge and affirmation are contrasted with Bosola's ambiguous conversion and the strange combination of truth and falsehood with which he faces the dying Duchess, and also with Ferdinand's madness, the opposite of tragic knowledge. Finally the scene self-consciously stages a tragedy and suggests the ambiguous status of tragedy as entertainment and the precariousness of the tragic catharsis. After this scene with its partial realignment of fiction and reality and its definition of tragedy, it is the task of the last act to examine what comes after tragedy, the disintegration of a world which rejects tragic knowledge, to put forward a more ironic and subdued view of tragic affirmation, and to mediate for the audience between fiction and the return to real life, a task which is particularly complex

because of the difficulty of distinguishing the two in the world of the play, and because of the hostile treatment of fiction in the play itself.

"Mirth and killing": Act V of *The Duchess of Malfi* and tragicomedy.

Act IV of *The Duchess of Malfi* defines for the audience their role in a complex drama by a careful definition of genre, by the image of the masque, and by presenting various characters behaving as audience and then abandoning this role. Images of ending pervade this act which forms the play's tragic conclusion. Act V completes its mediation with a return from tragedy, a view of a world like our own where the tragic absolutes cannot be sustained and where its characters, unlike the Duchess, are defeated by self-deception, self-pity, melancholy and madness. Dorothea Krook sees tragedy as an interlocking sequence of four units, "the act of shame or horror", the "suffering" which this causes, the "knowledge" generated by this suffering, and the "affirmation or reaffirmation of the dignity of the human spirit" which this knowledge produces¹⁶. If this is a valid scheme of tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* appears to use the tragic framework in a uniquely sceptical and ironic way¹⁷. In Act IV, the death of the Duchess forms a genuinely tragic centre: the end of the act, and Act V, however, provide a series of inversions of the tragic scheme, in which almost every point is made to appear dubious or is negated. After the death of the Duchess, the corrupt and self-centred world around her cannot sustain the tragic absolutes and falls apart into madness, despair, and tragicomedy. The first three acts present an ambiguous view of the tragic "act

of shame or horror", Act IV juxtaposes genuine tragic "knowledge" with knowledge of a more ambiguous kind. Act V, as Travis Bogard points out¹⁸, completes the satiric half of the play: it also ends the play on an ambiguous view of affirmation or reaffirmation.

Act V is in many ways profoundly different from the play which has gone before: the play has arranged tragedy as the peak, the highest in artistic form and in moral achievement, from which the final act charts a decline. Even the language changes in the fifth act: the last part of Act IV and Act V itself are full of negatives, "silence" (IV.ii.5, V.iv.83), "never" (V.v.90), "no" (V.v.108), "not-being" (IV.ii.301), and especially "nothing" (IV.i.138, IV.ii.15, V.ii.33,39,54,231,330,347, V.v.59,79,118), which echoes through the last act: after the affirmation of the Duchess' life and death the society she leaves behind her seems negative and sterile. Again in the final act the play's images of comedy and tragicomedy become more extreme and grotesque. Ferdinand's madness is made the occasion for crude farcical comedy as the Doctor "puts off his four Cloaks one after another" (V.ii.69 SD)¹⁹. The "fatal judgement" (V.ii.85) which falls on Ferdinand, the leading exponent in the play of satirical comedy, is that he becomes frozen into this one posture, a comic madman afraid of his own shadow. Again, Julia's wooing of Bosola begins as an enacted tragicomedy with a pistol and ends as tragedy in earnest, a less exuberant version of Flamineo's tragicomedy in the last act of The White Devil.

Act V, then, is deliberately held apart from the play's first four acts by a change in vocabulary and by an increase in pressure from comic and tragicomic incidents, and also in a change in some of the characters and in the perspective in which they

were placed. We as audience are held at an increasing distance from the characters, until we can view even the last words of the play with critical objectivity. It becomes less and less easy to accept what the characters tell us at face value, more and more difficult to view them with sympathy and involvement. Those characters who have stood as delegates of the audience, Bosola, Antonio, the Duchess, have either disappeared from the play or have had this special relationship distorted by the failure of their judgement or self-criticism. The murder of the Duchess and her resolute assertion of her own identity seems to have impaired the sense of self even of those ruthless egoists Ferdinand and the Cardinal. The two brothers who expressed their sense of self in murder lose it, Ferdinand by madness, the Cardinal retreating into himself, "puzzled" that his self-sufficiency is troubled by guilt. Antonio especially, until his death, seems to have shrunk in stature. His character has fallen apart: Bosola has taken over his clear-sighted grasp of character and Delio his stubborn integrity. Only his less attractive, less active, characteristics remain, trepidation, helplessness, indecision, poor judgement, desire for "any safety" (V.i.¹⁴~~13~~). His death is almost a relief to him, freeing him from fear and his conventional awe of the "fixed order" (1.i.6) of the courtly life: he, like Ferdinand and the Cardinal, is destroyed by the death of the Duchess.

Although this last act is held apart from the rest of the play by this change in the perspective of its characters and its changing audience-play relationship, it is tightly connected by plot as well as by theme. The final act might have been a second tragedy arising from the "act of shame or horror" of the Duchess'

murder: however, tragic structures are suggested now only to be negated, inverted or parodied, or accepted only in a limited sense. Brooding over this series of anti-tragedies is the contrasting presence of the Duchess. In a significant - almost, indeed, in a literal - sense the dead Duchess haunts this final act, a constant reminder of a better way of living. After what seems to be the death of the Duchess, she "haunts" Bosola, perhaps even appearing as he seems to see her "there, there!" (V.ii.356). She is heard in the echo scene, and perhaps is seen, "a face folded in sorrow" (V.iii.45). She is, of course, constantly talked about throughout the last act, and is metaphorically present in the echoes and summaries of the past with which the ending of the play is permeated²⁰. When she appears three times after her apparent death, it seems as if she and the life force which she represents are proof against death. The tragic affirmation provided by the death of the Duchess confronts the sceptical world left behind her: the tragicomic discords created by this antithesis profoundly modify the whole tragic effect.

As a whole the play has been hostile towards fictions: as shameful ways to avoid shame and as sportive action they threaten the Duchess' commitment to real life and to real relationships. Act IV appears to include an abandonment of fiction with the end of the masque and Bosola's rejection of disguise. Even this, however, is an ambiguous abandonment, as Bosola faces the dying Duchess with fictional images of reconciliation. In Act V fictions become increasingly threatening and difficult to control and even to recognise. Bosola creates fictional motives to deceive Julia. The Cardinal explains Ferdinand's madness by a fictional version of what actually happened, the story of the

ominous haunting of the family by a woman killed by her own kinsmen "for her riches " (V.ii.94). The Cardinal especially is the centre of fiction in this last act, as he lays "fair marble colours" on his "rotten purposes" (V.ii.297-8). In order to dispose of the body of Julia safely, he designs an elaborate fiction - "When he's asleep, myself will rise, and feign/Some of his mad tricks .../And feign myself in danger ..." (V.iv.14-16). For the rest of the play the Cardinal hardly ever escapes these disturbing suggestions of fiction and unreality. In this post-tragic world the Duchess' commitment to direct experience has been lost, and fiction begins to prey on itself: the Cardinal is doomed by his own uncritical trust in fiction and comedy. The play's distrust of fiction urges us as audience to be objective even about the fictional form of the play itself.

Even Bosola's conversion to real action and the values represented by the Duchess is deeply undermined by his continued dependence on fictions. His attitude to fiction in this final act is complex. He uses fictions with the Cardinal and with Julia, but also - and this is a new development - with himself. He claims "Penitence" (V.ii.348) and uncritically claims to be justified in taking part in "a most just revenge" (V.ii.343), without apparently realising the irony of revenging a crime which he himself committed: this is underlined by the ironic divergence between his intention of joining with Antonio and his accidental murder of his would-be ally. Moreover the Duchess' tragedy is followed by a number of distorted versions of it which become increasingly foreign to the spirit of tragedy: Cariola resists and lies, Julia dies with total agnosticism and a refusal to evaluate her own life. The Duchess' murder is carefully posed,

staged almost in slow-motion, to allow her time to make her final affirmation. Antonio, however, is killed almost casually. The shattering irony of this scene casts doubt not only on Bosola's conversion but on the whole possibility of just action in the confused post-tragic world. Bosola, who had tried to commit himself to duchessly "action indeed", finds himself inescapably trapped in fictions: the murder of Antonio is simply "Such a mistake as I have often seen/In a play..." (V.v.95-6). Antonio's death allows the murdered man a degree of knowledge and affirmation, but it is of so subdued a kind as to appear almost a parody of the intensity of the Duchess'. Like the Duchess, Antonio welcomes death as an end of fictions, and achieves a kind of self-definition, but it is a weary kind of definition which consists so largely in regret for his past deeds and the admission that throughout the play his judgement had been faulty. At the beginning of the play he praised the "fixed order" (1.i.6) of the French court: now he dies with profound distrust of the ambiguous "order" imposed by great men, wishing that his son might "fly the courts of princes" (V.iv.72).

Antonio dying finally abandons fiction, and Bosola too from this point ceases consciously to use fictions. Like Flamineo, he refuses to look who went before or who will follow him. Specifically he rejects fiction as imitation - "I will not imitate things glorious,/No more than base: I'll be mine own example" (V.iv.81-2). From now on Bosola is totally dependent on himself attempting, not always successfully, to improvise emotion and morality in this treacherous world where even the absolutes of tragedy appear only in grotesquely distorted form.

As Antonio asserts in limited form his own individuality.

and achieves a limited kind of knowledge and affirmation, the Cardinal and Ferdinand lose their sense of self in the last moments of the play. This antithesis of the assertion made by the Duchess and the denial of individuality hints at the paradox involved in the dramatic process of impersonation where actor and persona form a double figure, and this prepares for the resolution of the paradox as the play ends. The Cardinal's death is surrounded by threatening images of fiction and of comedy, as the courtiers interpret his cries simply as "counterfeiting" (v.v.20) and imagine how the Cardinal will "laugh" at them (V.v. 33). This death provides an exact judgement in its inversion of the tragic process: suffering is surrounded by comedy, knowledge brings only despair, and instead of affirming his own identity the Cardinal is reduced to "a little point, a kind of nothing" (V.v. 79) who wishes only to lose his sense of self and be "laid by, and never thought of" (V.v.90). The death of the Cardinal mediates for the audience between the play and real life by providing a grotesque mirror-image of tragedy with its positives reversed, and by preparing them for the moment when the play itself becomes only "a kind of nothing".

The death of Ferdinand follows the same pattern as that of his brother and is also surrounded by comedy and fiction instead of dissipating them in the positives of tragedy. Ferdinand's madness is another opposite of tragic knowledge and the assertion of individual identity: he imagines himself a soldier in a battle which turns into a comment on the break-up of the family - "My brother fight upon the adverse party?" (V.v.52). Like the cold and controlled Cardinal, the violent Ferdinand also becomes "a kind of nothing" in the face of death. Each reaches some kind of

sense of individual responsibility in their last moments of life, but this seems curiously impersonal, and is expressed in difficult images which seem irrelevant to the violent setting in which they are placed - "sorrow is held the eldest child of sin" (V.v.55), "Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust" (V.v.73).

The death of the Duchess is posed as a formal tragedy, slow and measured, allowing her to defeat fiction and comedy and to make a final affirmation. In the final act, however, the included incidents move further from the paradoxical calm of formal tragedy. Antonio's death is casual, ironic and muddled, and the affirmation it allows him to make is limited. The Cardinal and Ferdinand are destroyed as individuals by fiction and comedy, and they reach the opposite of tragic knowledge and affirmation. Finally the scene reaches the farthest stage from tragedy in the death of Bosola. Flamineo recognised some "goodness" (WD V.vi.269) in his death, the last of the play's many ironic inversions of value terms. Bosola believes that it can do him "no harm ... to die/In so good a quarrel ..." (V.v.99-100). His play however has not, like The White Devil, established this kind of moral inversion as a valid way of summing up a perverse and divided world. Bosola's statement seems less convincing, an uncritical shifting of responsibility which is the opposite of tragic knowledge. His sense of his own rightness is profoundly undermined by the accidental murder of Antonio and the casual murder of the servant, by the strong stress placed on his grudging sense of being "neglected" (V.v.87), and by images of uncertainty and of fiction - "in a mist" (V.v.94), "in a play" (V.v.96). Bosola's claim of the status of justified avenger is also cut across by the simple, and accurate, summing up his career by

Malateste - "Thou wretched thing of blood ..." (V.v.92)²¹.

The final irony of the play is the untrustworthiness of the last words of both Bosola and Delio: the affirmation of the death of the Duchess is dissipated in easy pessimism and incomprehension. Flamineo's critical agnosticism in the face of death sums up the whole effect of his play. Bosola's does not: the whole preceding action of the play unites to undermine his narrow and conventional stoic sentiments. He insists that men are only "dead walls or vaulted graves,/That ruin'd yields no echo" (V.v.97-8): we are forced to question this reductive view of human life by remembering that we have just heard the Duchess' grave returning an echo in a literal sense. Again, Bosola speaks of the "deep pit of darkness" in which mankind lives, "womanish and fearful" (V.v.101-2). The Arcadia quotation²² seems to have been altered specifically to allow the word "womanish" its inevitable double meaning, not only "cowardly", but also "female, like the Duchess". The latter connotation qualifies the whole sentiment, suggesting that a world which produced the Duchess and was modified by her values must be more than a pit of darkness. Bosola's two most negative definitions of human life, then, are negated by their context, but this ambiguous and indirect affirmation is the only one offered by the honest final act of the play. Finally Bosola urges "worthy minds" not to fear death in the service of "what is just" (V.v.103-4). This final attempt at affirmation, however, is qualified at the last moment by the sudden insight that he himself is not one of these worthy minds whose death allows tragic affirmation or tragicomic spiritual victory - "Mine is another voyage" (V.v.105).

Bosola's death, like those of Antonio and the Arragonian

brethren, provides an ironic inversion of tragedy with ambiguous knowledge and affirmation. The whole scene, too, takes on the shape of these ironic versions of tragedy: even Delio's last lines, which are presented as a final summary and affirmation, are ironically undercut. Delio attempts to redefine greatness and to sum up the play's suggestions that greatness lies not in birth and power but in moral excellence. The play's "great men" (V.v. 118) Ferdinand and the Cardinal have lost their identity as completely as footprints melting with the snow. Men are truly "great" only when they are "lords of truth" (V.v.119): "Integrity of life" alone, a complete and moral life, leads to immortal "fame" (V.v.120). The Duchess, like the heroine of a tragical comedy, is assured of "fame" because of the intensity of her life and her goodness. However if Webster intended his audience to be aware of the source of his quotation it could only add disquieting ironies to what seems a conventional summing-up. Horace's well-known ode which begins "Integer vitae..." (Odes 1, xxii) praises the man of perfect purity and innocence of life: his goodness protects him even from physical danger, for even the wolf will not attack the virtuous man²³. In Webster's play, however, the Duchess' "integrity of life" does not protect her, or her husband and children, from Ferdinand the wolf. Webster turns aside from the tragicomic insistence that truth and virtue shall at last succeed. The play approximates tragicomic experience not by toning down the tragedy of the Duchess, but by placing it in a context of untragic and antitragic response. Even the play's last lines which seem to offer "reaffirmation" turn out to be complex and ambiguous. The Duchess' tragedy is poised at the summit of a descending scale, and the play returns from this

height to the confusions, deceptions and uncertainty of tone of our real life.

Conclusions: tragicomedy, the audience, and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

The last act of a tragicomedy usually mediates for the audience between the world of the play and the working-day world by including a sequence of images of the play and its ending, fiction and its abandonment. The last act of *The White Devil* stages ending dramas and the ending of fiction, Flamineo's mock death, the murderous masque, and the final yielding of fiction to agnostic fact: a rigorously detailed mediation is created by this sequence of images. A similar sequence runs through Act IV of *The Duchess of Malfi*, with the ending masque, the rejection of disguise and the abandonment of the role of audience by the Duchess and by Ferdinand. In Act V, however, the movement is less detailed and more tentative. No character any longer represents the audience, and no character, not even Delio or Bosola, stands for the whole truth to which the play can return us from its fictions. The growing disengagement of audience and characters not only forces us to consider objectively the play's ironic treatment of tragic knowledge and affirmation and insists on the special importance of our involvement in the tragedy of the Duchess, but also prepares us for our total disengagement at the end of the fiction. The last act does not confront us directly with images of the ending of the play or of the activity of the audience: these images centred rather on the torture and death of the Duchess. The "divided catastrophe"²⁴ of the play allows its conclusion to provide a deliberately imperfect mediation

between fiction and real life, an emblem of the uncertainty of the play itself. The clear images of ending in Act IV are held against less perfect images in Act V, as the tragedy of the Duchess is contrasted with the muddled or ambiguous deaths of Antonio, Bosola and the Arragonian brethren: the play ends on an unresolved discord.

The White Devil approached tragicomedy in its support of the language of comedy, its tragicomic double-vision, its included comedies and tragicomedies, and the detailed mediation between fiction and fact which the end provides. Indeed it occasionally recalls in detail the structures of Fletcherian tragicomedy: Flamineo's mock-death, and Cornelia's abortive attack on her son, have the status of miniature tragicomedies. The Duchess of Malfi resembles the earlier play to some extent, although its treatment of comedy, for instance, is more critical. However The Duchess of Malfi rather recalls an earlier kind of tragicomedy, the "tragicall comedie" of Apius and Virginia where tragicomedy is defined as a kind of tragedy distanced or fore-shortened, and the play continues beyond tragedy to place the tragic experience in a wider perspective. For the first four acts Malfi seems to have a more obviously tragic framework in its unity of judgement and its use of ^{Dorothea Krook's} ~~the~~ four stages of tragedy: even in the fifth act the kind of mediation it offers the audience, the direct juxtaposition of fiction and real life, seems more characteristically tragic than that of the earlier play. However, the most important single aspect of the play's mediation for the audience between the ending fiction and returning fact is its detailed definition of its own genre and its analytic view of tragedy. The play juxtaposes an authentic tragedy in the fourth

act with a detached treatment of suffering, and an ambiguous treatment of knowledge and affirmation in the fifth: indeed the end of the fourth act, and the fifth, pose some of the central problems of tragedy, providing alternate views of tragic catharsis, tragic involvement, tragic pleasure, and the stages of the tragic experience.

Luecke found the play confused by its comic, satiric and tragicomic elements²⁵: it seems to me that these are posed significantly to define tragedy carefully and objectively, and to place the tragic experience of a heroic individual in the perspective of an anti-heroic society. The tragedy of Act IV is made more and not less moving and positive by the ironic series of inverted tragedies which in Act V leads the audience out of the play. Finally, Fletcher's definition of tragicomedy made clear the kind of play he was not writing, that which mixed "mirth and killing" and which included familiar elements of real life, real festivity, "laughing together", and real violence²⁶. This is exactly the kind of play Webster is writing in The Duchess of Malfi, a play in which tragedy is placed in a wider context: the tragic affirmation defeats comedy and satire but is refused by an un-heroic society which rejects the tragic values of the Duchess, willfully misunderstands them, fails to live up to them, or fatally misinterprets them. In The Duchess of Malfi by the admixture of comedy, tragicomedy and ironic inversions of the central experience, tragedy has learned to tell "the Whole Truth"²⁷.

NOTES

1. Nahum Tate, King Lear (Cornmarket Facsimile Ed, 1969), p.67.
2. Tate, King Lear, Epistle to Thomas Boteler.
3. William Archer, Review of the 1919 production of Malfi, Nineteenth Century (vol. 87, no. 515, Jan 1920), cited John Webster, G.K. and S.K. Hunter eds. (1969) p.95.
4. J.R. Mulryne, "The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi" (Jacobean Theatre, Stratford upon Avon Studies 1, Brown and Harris eds. 1960) p.219.
5. Ian Scott-Kilvert, John Webster (1964), p.25.
6. Jane M. Luecke, "The Duchess of Malfi: comic and satiric confusion in a tragedy" (SEL 4 1964) p.275.
7. Normand Berlin, "The Duchess of Malfi: Act V and Genre" (Genre 1970) p.362.
8. Louis D. Gianetti, "A contemporary view of The Duchess of Malfi" (Comparative Drama 3, Winter 1969-70) p.302.
9. An image which is particularly used to sum up the theme of action and inaction is that of sleep. It is used especially of Ferdinand - 1.i.174, 11.v.76, 111.i.21 etc. The Duchess, although attacked by images of sleep in the fourth act, is usually contrasted with it: in the wooing scene she urges Antonio to "Awake, awake man!" (1.i.455), and later when she dies she is "well awake" (1V.ii.224).
10. For the play's use of "pity" see M.C. Bradbrook, "Two Notes upon Webster" (MLR 43 1947), p.290.
11. E.g. Bosola's dirge turns into a comment on the ceremony of marriage, the signing of her "perfect peace" (1V.ii.185) recalls her giving Antonio his "Quietus est" (1.i.464), and

her discussion of her "last will" (1V.ii.200) recalls the pretext for which she summons Antonio to the wooing scene (1.i.376).

12. See J.S. Sastri, "Webster's Masque of Madmen: An Examination" (Indian Journal of English Studies 3, 1962) pp.33-43.

Although I do not agree with him in all details, he is certainly right in insisting that the masque has specific relevance to its context as comment on the people in the play.

13. Cf. 1.i.457-8, 1.i.469-70 - and Cariola's comment on the Duchess' division between power and womanhood at 1.i.504-6.

14. The play's use of the religious framework is ambiguous. On the whole the Duchess and her husband seem to reject the forms of organised religion - cf 1.i.487,491 - and Antonio at least seems to have a reputation for atheism - V.ii.133-5.

The lovers seem to be doomed partly because of their "jesting with religion" in escaping under cover of a pilgrimage (111.ii.317). The death of the Duchess seems to mark her reconciliation with Christian teaching (cf 111.v.80-1), and she certainly dies thinking of heaven (1V.ii.230-34).

However this religious theme is rather understated and in the last act is almost completely discarded.

15. C.G. Thayer, "The Ambiguity of Bosola" (SP 54, 1957) pp.162, 168.

16. Dorothea Krook, Elements of Tragedy (New Haven 1969) pp.8-9.

17. Ms Krook's attitude to The Duchess of Malfi appears somewhat inconsistent. On p.117 she mentions the play, along with "Oedipus Rex and King Lear, Phedre and Berenice, Doctor Faustus ..." as works with "a tragic vision of ... depth and intensity, ... comprehensiveness and coherence ..." Later,

- however, without mentioning Malfi, she suggests that "where the shamefulness of the initial act ... which precipitates the main suffering is in doubt, there all the other elements ... of the tragic fable are correspondingly put in doubt" (p.98). Her reasons for questioning the tragic status of Ibsen's plays (p.98) and of Antony and Cleopatra (p.188) however would seem equally applicable to The Duchess of Malfi.
18. Travis Bogard, The Tragic Satire of John Webster (NY 1955) p.140. "The fifth act has repeatedly been criticised as an anticlimactic cluttering of the stage with corpses ... The heroic story has been told. But the satiric story ... has not been completed.
19. The stage-direction is found only in Q4 (1708), but it is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the scene and may record a genuine tradition of stage business.
20. E.g. "action" is echoed from the first act at V.v.10, Bosola's discovery that the Cardinal's greatness was only "outward" (V.v.42) echoes Antonio's character in Act 1, etc.
21. It is difficult to know whether this assessment of Bosola is placed in question by being spoken by Malateste, who has been ridiculed throughout the play on the rare occasions on which he was mentioned (lll.i.41-3, lll.iii.9-34). One would have felt more comfortable if this were given to Pescara - or is the point that Bosola's self-delusion is so blatant that even the coward and fool Malateste recognises it?
22. Arcadia, v (Wks, ll.177): "in such a shadow, or rather pit of darkenes, the wormish mankinde lives ..."
23. Horace, Odes l. xxii -

namque me silva lupus in Sabina
dum meam canto Lalagen et ultra
terminum curis vagor expeditis
fugit inermem.

24. Anne Barton, "Nature's piece 'gainst fancy': the divided catastrophe in Antony and Cleopatra." (1973) p.11.
25. Luecke, "The Duchess of Malfi: comic and satiric confusion in a tragedy" (SEL 1964) pp. 275-290.
26. Aldous Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth" (Music at Night 1931) p.18.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Grace ... in Action": the tragicomic ending of the Devil's Law-case

When in about 1662 Sir William Davenant refurbished the Shakespeare-Fletcher tragicomedy The Two Noble Kinsmen, he found much in it which continued to appeal to the taste of the Restoration - a plot which solves the apparently insoluble problem of two men in love with one woman, the pathos of a mad scene, some rustic humour, and high principles, high passions, and high romance. What Davenant's The Rivals chose to omit, however, is illuminating. The earlier play is shorn of its elaborate ritual and its complex definition and discussion of manhood and womanhood. Especially significant is Davenant's remoulding of the tragicomic ending. The earlier play ends with two marriages, neither of which is welcomed or even understood by the female partner, with the death of one of the kinsmen and the narrow escape from death of the other, and with a vision of the cosmic irony that "we should things desire which do cost us/The loss of our desire" (V.iv.109-110). In The Rivals Davenant cuts through this tissue of ironies. In its final scene Celania the gaoler's daughter wins Philander whom she loves and he accepts that he is bound to her in "honour" although he still owes "affection" to Princess Heraclia¹. Heraclia herself accepts Philander's rival Theocles and the kinsmen are reconciled. Davenant's play is not a perversion of The Two Noble Kinsmen: the very creation of the gaoler's daughter suggests a happy and symmetrical ending which

the play, however, refuses to allow. Davenant's play, although fluent and coherent, is crude in its insistence on painless and conventional symmetry. In The Devil's Law-case these two views of tragicomedy face each other across the play: it finally chooses an honest and disturbing untidiness, although it seems that many of its critics would have preferred it to be a Websterian version of The Rivals.

The White Devil reaches its tragic affirmation by using the language and structures of comedy and tragicomedy: The Duchess of Malfi presents tragedy and then significantly dissipates it in a series of tiny comedies and tragicomedies. After The Duchess of Malfi Webster seems to have turned almost entirely to tragicomedy². The Devil's Law-case, the earliest of his tragicomedies and the only one of single authorship, is a powerful, bitter, difficult play moulded by clashing definitions and by tragicomic discords, a play which uses Marstonian and Fletcherian tragicomedy to create a world-picture very much like that of the tragedies and to question man's control over his own destiny and the validity of the tragic view of life.

Elizabeth Brennan has suggested that tragicomedy as a dramatic form "was usually quite heavily weighted towards tragedy"³. Although, as I have suggested, Jacobean tragicomedy resembles comedy in its structure, the material which fills out this structure can vary very widely in tone and colouring: in The Devil's Law-case tragedy provides a particularly challenging opposition. Paradoxically the play uses the language of comedy less extensively than Webster's earlier tragedies. "Merry" and "laughter" are most frequently used, and significantly the word "comical" appears twice, apparently the only usage in Webster's

plays, and in both cases it is used to describe the ending of the play⁴: the play seems despite its sombreness, to insist on its own comic identity. The vocabulary of comedy is dispersed fairly evenly throughout the play. Unlike the earlier tragedies, however, there is a tendency to introduce peripheral comic scenes of low tension, scenes not involving the central characters especially closely. In The White Devil Vittoria's trial is introduced by a comic-satiric scene in which Flamineo jests with the lawyers: in The Devil's Law-case a comic scene introduces the trial, but it is a scene in which the lawyers jest among themselves and repeat unfunny old jokes and Leonora, although present, is almost silent. The play tends to disperse its obviously comic elements in jokes and funny stories rather than to relate them directly to the dangerous incidents of the main plot: the result is to create a comic background for the near-tragic incidents of despair, madness, and attempted murder.

On the whole in The Devil's Law-case the men, and especially Romelio, support comedy and the women tragedy: the conflict of the sexes and the conflict of the genres are complementary aspects of the uncertain and dangerous world of the play. Almost every scene where Romelio meets Jolenta is rich in clashing definitions of genre. In 1.ii Romelio tries to compel Jolenta to accept his comic image, marriage with Ercole, while she insists on tragic images - "the tomb-maker/To take measure of my coffin" (1.ii.2-3). Act III scene iii especially seems central to the play's definition of the relationship between the warring genres. Jolenta appears with the trappings of tragedy - "in mourning" with "two tapers, a death's head, a book" (III.iii.initial SD). Romelio, however, jokes flippantly about his involvement with

Angiolella and feigns to find Jolenta's bitter retort "pleasant" (111.iii.42). Blindly complacent within his own satirical vision, Romelio urges his sister to "smile" (111.iii.157) at the imperfections of human life, and he completely rejects her attempt to improvise tragedy by urging him to kill her because she is already pregnant by Contarino. From her own tragic view of life Jolenta accepts comic relief from her own pain, agreeing to pretend to be the mother of Romelio's bastard to "beguile" some of her "sorrow" (111.iii.156). However it seems at last that comedy is simply a mocking device to exacerbate her own agony: her sorrow is "fantastical", hiding behind the surface of comedy, "a pied fool's coat" (111.iii.181-3). The usual definitions of genre are reversed, and it is tragedy which seems to offer consolation, while comedy is "bitter" (111.iii.165), threatening and anguished.

In 111.iii, after facing one of the play's representatives of tragedy, Romelio then faces the other. Leonora, ageing, passionate, terrified of the passage of time, willing to hurt because she is herself hurt, is drawn with an intensity and simplicity of feeling which are almost tragic. Romelio's blindness to her pain is as disturbing as his insensitivity to Jolenta's, and his ignorance forms a half-comic contrast with the audience's more complete understanding of the situation. He is prepared to "smile" (111.iii.221) at his own lie about Jolenta's pregnancy, while Leonora is horrified, wounded, and "very sick" (111.iii.225) at the news of his murder of Contarino. Her speech of distraction (111.iii.232-76) develops tragic themes of madness, unrequited love, age, deception and despair, hell and the devil, and has a terrible conviction in the dark world of the play. It

seems to her that comedy is no longer possible: her love for Contarino was her last chance, her "last merriment 'fore winter" (111.iii.250). Now, entirely pointed towards tragedy, she meditates on revenge.

In The Devil's Law-case tragedy and comedy clash across the first four acts. The play constantly exploits ironic divergences between the views of the action of various characters, of Jolenta who wishes for tragedy but is forced into bitter comedy, of Leonora who accepts tragedy, and of Romelio who, despite his exercise in revenge tragedy as he tries to murder Contarino, is orientated towards comedy and satire. The incompleteness of the understanding of each of these characters suggests the inadequacy of the simple genres they support to frame and express the complex world of the play. Leonora, the old woman in love with the young man, might have been a simpler comic figure, a Jacobean Lady Wishfort, but the comic role is surrounded by convincing pain and fear. Webster is adopting

the joke of making romantic love ridiculous by applying it to undesired middle-aged women (5)

but at the same time he is inverting this inversion by aligning our sympathies with the suffering woman so that she is never allowed to appear simply ridiculous. Similarly Romelio, witty, unscrupulous, acquisitive and murderous might have been a tragic malcontent, but his own comic understanding of the world profoundly modifies this role. The play sets out to complicate comic and tragic stereotypes, and to complicate simple genre definitions as an honest way of depicting the shifting, ambiguous world of the action: the audience is led through the web of colliding definitions by the play's unusually clear and direct discussions of fiction, of the genres, and of the nature of language.

"Grace... in Action": visual and verbal in *The Devil's Law-case*.

A great part of the grace of this (I confess) lay in action; yet can no action ever be gracious, where the decency of the language, and ingenious structure of the scene, arrive not to make up a perfect harmony.

(To the Judicious Reader ls. 14-17).

The introductory epistle to *The Devil's Law-case* is significantly addressed "To the Judicious Reader" and, like the introductory epistle to Jonson's *Sejanus*, it tries to define ways in which the play read might be different in effect from the play seen. Webster seems to feel that the gulf between word and enacted presentation created special problems for *The Devil's Law-case*, and he stresses that the "perfect harmony" of the play is at least partly dependent on its staging, its "grace ... in action". This explicit concern for the play as enactment suggests that Webster allows spectacle to carry important weight which becomes obscured when the play is considered simply as words on a page. Indeed in the play, and especially in the final act, many central events are presented visually rather than verbally. In this chapter I shall consider the balance Webster achieves between language and show, and the significance in its tragicomic context of the play's curious silence and its visual emphasis.

"Action" is an important word in *The Devil's Law-case*, as it was in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In the earlier play "action" was presented as a sign of commitment to a real world and a refusal to take part in the self-defeating games of the Aragonian brethren and their dependents. In *The Devil's Law-case* Romelio praises action in the same kind of terms that were used in *Malfi*

- "The chiefest action for a man of great spirit/Is never to be out of action" (1.i.55-6). The play is interested in the theme of "action", and at the same time presents this theme largely in terms of "action": the play is critically interested in the ways in which action succeeds or fails. Although Romelio praises "action", as the play progresses the word comes to take on more equivocal connotations. The "act" of Ercole's killing of Contarino (11.iv.5), and that of Romelio's attempt at murder (111.ii.120,138) both go awry: the play sets up tragic situations, but in the play, as in the fifth act of The Duchess of Malfi, tragedy is beyond the grasp of its characters. They are incapable of decision or of meaningful action, and any attempt to assert their own power over "action" recoils on them. Contarino and Ercole fail to kill each other, Leonora fails to convict her son of bastardy, Jolenta fails in her attempt to marry Contarino. More grotesquely, Romelio's attempt to create tragedy by disguising himself as a Marlovian hero-villain directly precipitates the happy ending: the wound he gives Contarino actually leads to the sick man's recovery⁶. In the world of the play intention and result, appearance and reality, are dislocated. In the final act the Capuchin praises the way in which God can ironically "invert man's firmest purpose" (V.v.14). However in the first four acts this system of ironic inversion seems more the result of anarchic accident and human failure than of a clear divine operation. The play's dislocation of cause and effect is entirely characteristic of tragicomedy. The genres become distorted and misleading: the attempt to produce tragedy leads directly to the tragicomic ending. Human decisiveness, the simple^e system of genre classification, and action itself, all seem in danger of being

ironically undermined in the world of the play.

If the precariousness of action is an important tragicomic theme of the play, the failure of language is as central and as characteristic of tragicomedy. In The Devil's Law-case, as in Fletcherian tragicomedy, language proves deceptive, metaphors are misunderstood, the literal and metaphorical are confused, and the attempt to use language as action goes disastrously wrong. Although Romelio praises "action", the world at least of the women of the play is one where words have replaced action, an inversion of the situation in The Duchess of Malfi. Leonora admits that she and Winifred have spent their lives "with talking nothing and doing less" (111.iii.375) and admits that she has given her servant "good words, but no deeds" (111.iii.379): indeed one of the things Contarino first praises about the older woman is her "language" (1.i.109). Despite her trust in words, however, Leonora is particularly apt to misunderstand and misuse them. She entirely misunderstands Contarino's willfully difficult metaphorical demand for "your picture" (1.i.135), for instance: he intends an indirect hint at his love for Jolenta, but Leonora interprets this quite literally as a token of his esteem for her.

Leonora's commitment to words prevents her from penetrating beyond the surface of things. One of the most significant emblem/used by her and of her is that of the picture, a mark of her understanding of appearances but not what lies behind them. Her literal interpretation of Contarino's metaphorical request for her "picture" leads her into a lengthy speech about the painting of portraits, and later she compares herself to "one of our best picture-makers" (111.ii.252). Her dependence on language leads her into an attempt to discredit Romelio in which the only

case she can make is made through words and with the help of a picture, both of which fail her. She has kept the portrait of Crispiano for forty years, and yet in the trial scene she does not even recognise the man himself. Leonora is attached to the surface of things, a woman of language rather than action, who is constantly deceived about the relationship between metaphor and literal truth. The image of the picture used by and of Leonora is one of the play's most important links between verbal and visual.

Language in the play, then, appears deceptive, and any attempt to use it as if it were a kind of action as are made by Arbaces in A King and No King prove disastrous. The play sets up a system of deflating commentary on the rhetoric of tragedy: Romelio's declaration of his own reckless courage, for instance, is seen as nothing more than "very good words" (1V.ii.88). The play repeatedly uses puns, verbal riddles and equivocations in an attempt to define ways in which language deceives, and value-words, like "honour" or "manly"⁷ are characteristically given an ironic weight. But perhaps the most important repeated motif which illustrates the equivocal nature of language is that of the oath or curse. Leonora swears to curse Jolenta should she marry Contarino (1.ii.92-5). Later Jolenta, believing Romelio's slander, swears not to marry Contarino (111.ii.150-3), and Contarino, the third apex of this strange triangular relationship, is deceived by Jolenta's riddling letter and also swears never to marry her (V.ii.40). In these three cases words take on a disquieting physical force, creating real and impassible barriers to the union. Elsewhere, though, as in the religious vows of Angiolella and Leonora, words can simply be put aside. Language can function as a kind of action, solid and forceful, or it can

function as "merely voice" (AK and NoK IV.iv.126) . It is impossible to predict and impossible to control.

The first half of the play finds "action" deceptive but language even more so. In a play which distrusts language so completely the playwright in the final act tests action against language in an attempt to discover which is the least illusive. The end of the play is presented very largely in terms of "action", of masque, duel, procession and "dumb pageant" (V.iv.130), and the connecting speeches are brief, perfunctory and external. Webster, usually a playwright who relies very much on verbal methods of expression, seems to be seeking in this final act to find a means of expression which does not rest so heavily on words without descending to "haphazard oracular grunts"⁸.

The Devil's Law-case is profoundly interested in the interaction between metaphor and literal truth, in the relationship between reality and the various fictional forms in which this reality can be represented and expressed. Whereas Leonora is associated with the failure of language and the image of painting, Romelio is associated with the failure of action and the image of the play. In his attempt to murder Contarino, his disguise as a Jew and his list of the enormities of which he is capable seem to allude to the character of Barabas in Marlowe's The Jew of Malta⁹. Here Romelio's most obvious attempt at action goes badly wrong and is significantly undermined by suggestions of fiction - "I could play with my own shadow ..." (III.ii.2). Even in the trial scene, where Romelio is almost the only character not actively engaged in outrageous lies, Contilupo insists on the pretence and unreality associated with Romelio's career: he is "A giant in a May-game, that within/Is nothing but a porter ..." (IV.ii. 129-30). Contilupo uses this image to describe Romelio's bastardy. Ironically he is wrong about this, though right to associate Romelio with fiction and pretence.

The first four acts of The Devil's Law-case, then, establish clashing genre definitions, and dislocate the dramatic logic so that a tragicomic world is created where causes and effects seem distorted and out of proportion. The play also sets up competing elements of action and language in an attempt to find a means of expression by which can be discussed the play's ambiguities and the equivocal nature of metaphor and of the theatrical form itself. The final act brings into particularly sharp focus the gulf between action and language and the precariousness of metaphor.

"The leading of the plot": prediction and surprise in
The Devil's Law-case.

Act Five of The Devil's Law-case has not been given the detailed study as a tragicomic ending which it seems to me to deserve. Almost invariably the few critics who have considered the play at all have praised the power and intensity of the trial scene but condemned the ending as "insipid"¹⁰. Madeleine Doran's description of the play's ending is typical.

A complicated plot of rivalries in love, duels and disappearances leads up to a fine trial scene in which the conscienceless Leonora's revengful intentions against her own son are exposed and thwarted. But Webster does not let the findings of the trial govern the outcome of the play. He winds it up with a solution of affairs directly athwart every sympathy he has created, all sense of justice, and what might be called the "leading" of the plot. Instead of the double ending one expects from such a plot, with the virtuous rewarded and the abductors and traducers at least shamed if not punished, there is an obviously contrived and anticlimactic "happy" ending. Everyone gets a mate: even Leonora is rewarded with the man she has tried to take away from her own daughter, and the unoffending daughter has her second and less favoured suitor fobbed off on her.

One is reminded of Dr. Johnson's "indignation" at the pardoning of Angelo in Measure for Measure¹². In stressing that the tragicomic ending is "obviously contrived" it seems to me that Miss Doran fails to notice the way in which the play deliberately inverts the comic hierarchies by making not Jolenta but Leonora the centre of sympathy and the pivot of the plot. The play ironically suggests conventional genre-structures only to break them down, so that Webster deliberately undermines and finally denies the "leading" of his plot.

Webster certainly suggests, sketchily and indirectly, the "double ending one expects from such a plot". Leonora, the character who really complicates the comic planning and who, disturbingly and unconventionally, becomes the play's centre of sympathy, might have been married off to Crispiano: she has kept his picture for forty years and selects him as a fictional lover, and this might have been used to illustrate some feeling for him. That he is allowed to disappear almost silently suggests a deliberate anticlimax, a deliberate discord. More plausibly, Leonora might have withdrawn altogether from the marriage stakes, like the Queen of Corinth in the Fletcher-Massinger tragicomedy which bears her name. Again, Ercole is described in the introductory list of characters, though not in the play itself, as a Knight of Malta, a member of an order which, as Elizabeth Brennan has pointed out, was bound by a monastic vow¹³. It may be that Webster originally intended to have these two complicating characters withdraw to leave Jolenta and Contarino free to resume their relationship. Ercole's name, an Italianised version of "Hercules", would recall the hero who chose virtue rather than pleasure, and perhaps we are warned to expect the same decision in the play¹⁴.

However although Webster by implication suggests this tidy, undisturbed and undisturbing ending, he packs the play with feeling which works against any such simple conclusion. The play systematically places bar after bar in the way of the expected ending. Leonora is not a woman who can simply, tidily, deny the validity of her own passions, and Crispiano is too shadowy a character to be able to engage her. Again, as I have suggested, apparently casual promises suddenly develop an arbitrary, terrifying force which keeps Jolenta and Contarino apart. Above all, the play repeatedly suggests reservations about Contarino as a suitable husband for Jolenta. He doubts her fidelity even when no serious problem can have arisen (1.i.196-8). He is extravagant (1.ii.62-5), thoughtless and unreliable, engaging in the duel with Ercole even when he has promised Jolenta not to do so. Indeed Romelio's suggestion that he loves Jolenta for her person and Leonora for her money (111.iii.133-6) is not disproved by the play. The "leading of the plot" in the first four acts of The Devil's Law-case suggests comic and tragic conventions but the play systematically obstructs them and questions their validity. Webster finally refuses to impose the expected patterns on the convincing emotions and vivid uncertainty which the play has created. Its fifth act, like that of The Duchess of Malfi, moves towards a new tragicomic form.

The first four acts of the play, then, make equivocal and unresolved definitions of genre. The audience's attention is focused by these ambiguous definitions, and also by the play's ambiguous presentation of the essential elements of dramatic performance, action and language. The first four acts suggest an ending too simple and two-dimensional for the play we are given.

Indeed the use of play imagery in the first four acts, when it is not used simply to describe fiction and pretence, is very much concerned with the ending of plays. Romelio's "meditation" about the meaninglessness of human life contains the insistence that "the last act be the best i'th'play" (11.iii.112). Later ~~he~~^{he} adds a disquieting question about the failure of the theatrical form - "And are not bad plays/The worse for their length?" (111.iii.6-7). Webster's interest here in the nature of the dramatic ending catches our attention and directs us to look carefully at the ending which the play gives us.

Again the first four acts of the play allow fiction and fact to blur and distort. Lies and disguises, deceptive metaphors and elaborate fictions are a leading motif of the play: Romelio's Jewish disguise, Leonora's detailed and circumstantial account of Romelio's bastardising, Jolenta's false claim to be pregnant, the disguises used by Contarino and Ercole, as well as the play imagery, all suggest the difficulty of distinguishing truth from falsehood, literal from metaphorical. But the situation is not even as simple as this. In an attempt to persuade Jolenta to re-adopt a fiction she has herself abandoned and to pretend to be the mother of Angiolella's child, Romelio invents what he himself describes as a "most unnatural falsehood" (111.iii.88), "direct falsehood" (111.iii.130), claiming that Leonora really wants Contarino for herself. This "direct falsehood", however, turns out to be true and to govern the action of the play. In this deceptive tragicomic world lies ironically turn into truth in the same disturbing way as truth turns into lies. The final act of the play, must resolve its clashing genre-definitions, and reconcile and distinguish truth and falsehood.

Especially difficult, the last act of a play which is so critical about fictions must make some final statement about its own fictional nature.

"This dumb pageant": preparations for the tragicomic ending.

Act V Scene 1 continues to establish the tissue of opposites which the play creates and resolves in this final act. Jolenta who has pretended to be pregnant and Angiolella who is pregnant join forces in the play's attempt to distinguish fiction and reality. Angiolella accepts her position seriously and quietly: Jolenta is haunted by a sense of the bitter comedy of her situation, laughing (V.i.14) and urging Angiolella to "laugh" (V.i.21). Comedy seems to be made from the same materials as tragedy, fear, deception and insecurity. Comedy is placed squarely alongside the account of the quarrel, a duel in which Jolenta has a "sweetheart" (V.i.29) against her brother. Ercole has silently been accepted as Jolenta's "sweetheart": her own confusion between fact and fiction has blurred over even this inconsistency. Finally the two women, the hysterical Jolenta and the calm ex-nun simply try to get away from the impending duel, a final attempt to escape tragedy.

In V.ii the play's attempt to replace language by action is especially prominent. The play is becoming increasingly visual: the conflict is presented in visual terms as Ercole and Contarino enter "coming in friars' habits" (V.ii. 13 SD). This visual centre to the scene introduces the equivocating letter which Jolenta sent to Ercole, punningly claiming that Romelio had fathered her shame, and which is one of the play's most potent images of the way that language deceives. As he had done in his

request for Leonora's "picture", Contarino cannot distinguish the clashing literal and metaphorical interpretations of Jolenta's letter. Jolenta's blurring of the two partly marks her own confusion and disorientation, but it is also a test aimed by her at Ercole: he, unlike Contarino, is finally able to see past the metaphor to the real woman, and accept her for herself.

This scene, as well as continuing the act's movement from verbal to visual, also begins the final examination of theatrical conventions. The audience interprets the motif of the incestuous brother as the red herring it is, a conventional device which has no place in the convincing tragicomic world, and would only be accepted by a man like Contarino who himself lives so much on the level of convention. The scene emphasises the unlikelihood of some of the conventional theatrical poses before making the final unconventional repatterning. Why does Contarino remain in disguise? He asks himself the question (V.ii. 15-20) but provides no satisfactory answer: he thrives on concealing himself behind metaphor, unwilling to face or to adopt direct literal truth. The final scenes ironically undercut some aspects of theatricality. Throughout the scene, and throughout the act, we are increasingly distanced from the people of the play: here we are forced to look critically at their theatrical poses and conventions. As the play moves towards its end, "action" takes over, so that we watch spectacle and display rather than becoming involved with the people behind the spectacle. The play begins to return us to our seats in the theatre by its insistence that drama is composed of dubious metaphorical language, of strange poses, and of visual action which, inevitably, we can only view from the outside.

V.iii again presents clashing genre definitions and takes important steps away from fiction towards the revelation of truth. The Surgeon, Winifred's admirer, now reveals the truth about Contarino. This revelation, however, cannot be made simply, but requires a whole mass of backing-up from images of fiction and theatricality: in order to reveal the truth the Surgeon takes on Romelio's rejected Jewish disguise. The genres continue to clash. Jolenta seems "a little mad" (V.iii.29) like a tragic heroine, but it is hinted that the revelation of the "comical event" (V.iii.29) will restore her sanity. Comedy and tragedy collide, and paradoxically it seems that the truth can only be told by means of a complicated fiction. Throughout this last act, as in the introductory Epistle to the Reader, confidence and scepticism about fiction as a way of telling the truth face each other, another aspect of the uncertainty of the world of the play.

V.iv begins in an aimless, low-pitched comic scene which is cut across by the entrance of Romelio "very melancholy" (V.iv.39 SD). The Capuchin attempts to compel him to adopt a Christian, and in this context that seems to mean a tragic, view of life, urging him to "meditate of death" (V.iv.54). Romelio, though, refuses to respond. He adopts the cool bravado of a Flamineo - "I will be mine own pilot" (V.iv.52), and he insistently refuses to think about death - "I took out that lesson/When I once lay sick of an ague ..." (V.iv.55-6). Romelio does not deny tragic understanding, but he does place it somewhere in the past: the play seems to ~~be~~ present a post-tragic world, like that of the last act of The Duchess of Malfi. Tones and definitions clash, Romelio's desire to "laugh" (V.iv.63) and

the Capuchin's insistence upon death, Romelio's ideal of the "honest man" and the Capuchin's of a "good Christian" (V.iv.67, 66). Romelio's half-comic Websterian bravado and the Capuchin's solid Christian assumptions simply form an antithesis: neither is specifically affirmed by the play.

Again the scene is cut across by action, a "dumb pageant" (V.iv.130) in which Leonora enters "with two coffins borne by her servants, and two winding-sheets stuck with flowers, presents one to her son, and the other to Julio" (V.iv.109 SD). Tragedy and the threat of tragedy are distanced and controlled by being presented simply in visual, and in musical, terms. This disquieting suggestion of tragedy might have precipitated tragic understanding and the telling of the truth. Romelio, however, simply retreats into another fiction, a claim to penitence which allows him to conceal his real intentions. The Capuchin after Leonora's tragic "pageant" tries, like the Duke in Measure for Measure, to reassert comfortably and easily the tragicomic form:-

And now that I have made you fit for death,
 And brought you even as low as is the grave,
 I will raise you up again

..... turn this intended duel
 To a triumph.

(V.iv.143-7).

The Capuchin's attempt to make heavenly comforts of despair, however, goes disquietingly wrong, like every attempt to impose rigid genre structures throughout the play. The would-be stage manager, author of the would-be tragicomedy, is humiliatingly locked up with Leonora in a tower, while Julio makes snide remarks about the Capuchin's relationship with the older woman.

Now that fiction has made a significant come-back in the

world of the play, Julio reports the imprisoned Capuchin's claim that Contarino is "living" (V.iv.165). Romelio, however, willfully misinterprets this verbal escape-clause - "he means that he would have Contarino's living/Bestowed upon his monastery ..." (V.iv.166-7). It is still impossible to distinguish the different meanings of a word. The final scene opens in this context of the intractability of language, of uncertain genre-classifications, and of pervasive irony: Romelio seems to be bringing destruction on himself by using fictions and misunderstanding language, and heaven inverts man's firmest purpose. The final scene must show the result of these ironies, must reconcile clashing genre-definitions, and must complete the play's movement from fiction to fact, and its discussion of fiction.

"These so comical events": the audience and the tragicomic ending.

The final scene of The Devil's Law-case reopens on this world which mistrusts language and theatrical conventions, which is moving from fiction to uncompromising fact, and which seems determined to propel itself toward tragedy. Throughout the scene we as audience are placed very much on the outside of the action, observing its pageantry and its visual, unverbally precise - the language of ceremony even moves out of English into French. The lists are set up, first the judges and then the competitors enter ceremoniously and the duel is fought. The scene interprets theatricality as being almost solely concerned with action: words seem inadequate and are very sketchily used. Romelio suddenly cuts across the rigid ceremonial forms: "Stay, I do not well know whither I am going ..." (V.vi.9). The Machiavel's trust in "action" collapses:

it is not enough simply to act out these external forms. The "security" which has been pinpointed as Romelio's major fault (e.g. 11.iv.167) can no longer sustain him in the world of the play where neither action nor language is trustworthy. P.B. Murray sees Romelio's hesitation as a sign of the workings of divine grace¹⁵, D.C. Gunby as "unconvincing" but "a miracle" nonetheless¹⁶. However any such Christian interpretation is carefully understated by Webster, except as it marks Romelio's return to society and predicts the happy ending. Ironically the scene's very insistence on "action" has undermined Romelio's faith in action. He suddenly realises that death is very near, and the man who has consistently denied tragedy is forced to admit its possibility - "I may be dead ere he comes ..." (V.vi. 15). This speech seems to mark Romelio's achievement of what in another play might have been tragic "knowledge": here however it is perfunctory and ambiguous, and we view it entirely from the outside. This final scene mediates for the audience between the fiction and the ending of the fiction by giving us increasingly partial explanations of the motives of the people of the play and even of its events. The play falls apart into spectacle and into short speeches and sketchy explanations. The formal shape of the staged fiction finally seems inadequate, and we are forced to judge its people as we judge people in real life, from the outside, and on partial evidence.

The scene, then, introduces tragic motifs and a brief acceptance of tragedy. The duel, however, is again interrupted by the entrance of Leonora with her good news, and in a tragicomic discord the possibility of tragedy is cut across by the comic ending. Leonora, previously a supporter of tragedy, now appears

on the side of comedy, reconciliation and renewal. The statement about "Contarino is living" (V.iv.166) which Romelio had previously, perversely, misinterpreted, is now revealed as simple literal truth as Contarino casts off his disguise. Metaphor gives way to literal truth, fiction to fact, as the audience is prepared for the ending of the fictional nature of the play.

The movement away from fiction and from tragedy, though, is not complete with the banishing of disguise. Madeleine Doran found that the ending contradicted the "leading" of the plot in the way that Contarino accepts Leonora. Jolenta, being out of sight, seems to be out of mind: in a play which judges so substantially in terms of action this woman who has for some time had no action to perform is relegated to a minor place. Lucas¹⁷ found it difficult even to determine what was happening here, but it seems to be another example of the play's growing tendency to explain to the eye rather than to the ear: on stage its patterning would be perfectly clear, and would seem less abrupt and understated. Action and language are becoming ever more separate: the complex riddling language of the first encounter of Contarino and Leonora has been replaced by almost no language at all. However, although the process of staging would dispose of some of the difficulties of this ending, the reforming relationship is nonetheless to some extent an equivocal one. Leonora suddenly "Claims to be nearer" (V.vi.25) to Contarino than a casual friend and he steps into the place of her recognised lover, claiming to have "vowed" (V.vi.26) his life to her. In a society which treats words both so lightly and so seriously this vow inevitably has an ambiguous status. The reforming relationships are surrounded by question marks: Contarino has spent much of the play flattering the older woman to her face and criticising her behind

her back, and Romelio's accusation that Contarino loves her "for her money" (111.iii.136) is never answered. In this relationship at least the play's ending gives a sceptical redefinition of comedy, making the relationship so abrupt and lacking in verbal explanation and so rooted in fiction and pretence. Nonetheless the play's convincing depiction of Leonora's importunate passion gives the relationship an emotional depth which renders it a happy ending despite its unresolved ambiguities.

In this final scene Romelio's fugitive perception of tragedy is interrupted by this modified acceptance of comedy. The play provides a happy ending of a kind, but it is an ironic happy ending. Webster interprets the comic ending simply as one which gives all the characters what they want and leaves them to whatever kind of future these fulfilled desires bring. The play's increasingly exclusive interest in its own dramatic framework is illustrated by the fact that no future is suggested beyond this fictional ending. The ending also inverts some of the usual comic motifs and emblems. The marriage that is predicted here is not a conventional one, nor does the play allow us to accept it uncritically. Northrop Frye¹⁸ sees one aspect of comedy as a form of the Oedipus conflict, where an old man and a young man, often father and son, contend for the love of the same woman. This pattern, basic to Roman comedy and common in Jacobean city comedy, almost invariably ends in victory for the young man. Webster, though, turns this comic pattern upside down: mother and daughter fight for the same man, and the older woman wins. The tragicomic world of the play fails to live up to any ideals or to fit into any conventional framework: we are not allowed to assume that youth is the key to success or that passion is the preserve of the young. Webster insists that our generic expectations are crude and conventional by juxtaposing tragedy and comedy, and by

distancing us from the events of the play by expressing the complex and discordant ending visually rather than verbally.

Potential tragedy and Romelio's momentary perception of tragedy dissolves into this ironic restatement of the comic ending as Leonora and Contarino are united and even Romelio accepts the comic ending - "If I do not/Dream, I am happy too" (V.vi.26-7). Fiction and metaphor seem to have been abandoned, and it seems as if the play has begun the fairly simple process of returning the audience to their seats in the theatre.

However the centre of this last scene, the play's most elaborate and impressive image of the abandonment of fiction and the reconciliation of fact and metaphor is still to come. Like the almost tragic duel and the comic repatterning, it is expressed primarily in visual terms. A masque-like procession enters,

Angiolella veiled and Jolenta, her face coloured like a Moor, the two surgeons, one of them like a Jew.

(V.vi.28 SD)

Critics have on the whole failed to examine very closely this final image of theatricality: P.B. Murray insists that it is a "rather gratuitous statement" of the play's "theme" of false appearances¹⁹, Gunnar Boklund sees it simply as a way of bringing about Jolenta's moral reinstatement²⁰. However it seems to me that the masque is more complex than this and deserves detailed consideration.

The play's apparent abandonment of fiction, is followed by the reappearance of disguise: in the shifting tragicomic world little is stable or permanent. The masque even repeats precisely some of the play's images of fiction, providing that double-vision so characteristic of tragicomedy. Leonora entered the trial

scene to erect her impressive structure of fiction "with a black veil over her" (IV.ii.43 SD): now it is Angiolella who is veiled. Leonora in her "dumb pageant" (V.iv.130) brought images of death, "winding-sheets stuck with flowers" (V.iv.109 SD): Jolenta now brings good news and the movement towards reconciliation. Contarino and Ercole entered to fight the duel dressed "in friars' habits" (V.ii.13 SD): now Angiolella and Jolenta are dressed as nuns. Romelio, who has finally abandoned fiction, finds himself facing his own Jewish disguise on one of the surgeons: the disguise behind which he attempted murder is now re-used to bring the good news of the comic conclusion. In the final scene of Pirandello's Enrico IV the older man, now cured of his delusion, faces an actor playing his own younger self, and the Marquesa and her daughter, each dressed as Matilda, also face each other. Past and present, fact and fiction, are juxtaposed and first confused and then differentiated in much the same way as in The Devil's Law-case. In Webster's play, however, the repetition and the retreat into fiction leads not to disaster but to the play's solemn happy ending. Visually Jolenta's masque recalls earlier images of hostility and disharmony which are now to be dismissed, and the happy ending is predicted by her own tacit willingness to accept a second-best role in the reforming comic society.

For the seventeenth century the masque almost always carried the idea of harmony and reconciliation: tragic writers exploited it as a murderous device at least in part because of the ironic prediction of unity and the happy ending which it provided. Again the masque allowed audience participation: the masquers selected members of this audience to dance with or to

murder. Here Jolenta's masque unites the people on stage as an audience sharing the same society and the same assumptions. At the same time, however, the audience in the theatre is distanced and detached: we cannot participate in the reforming society but can simply watch fictional people enacting a dramatic fiction. In the final act the masque reminds us forcibly of the fictional nature of the whole, and its implications of harmony and reconciliation reduce the chaotic action of the rest of the play to the status of an anti-masque, as does the entry of Compass' wedding procession in A Cure for a Cuckold.

The Moor is so common a feature in the iconography of masques and similar entertainments that "it seems that the theme was ... without any specific meaning"²¹. The famous biographical portrait of Sir Henry Unton in the National Portrait Gallery shows a masque presented for his wedding in 1580. The procession consists of classical gods - Mercury and Diana can be distinguished - and of torch-bearing Cupids, alternately black and white. On one level, then, the use of the image of the Moor seems simply to be a way of making large and striking visual contrasts, of announcing a particular kind of entertainment, and of promising festivity. Many of the usual attributes of the Moor and of blackness - ugliness, lust, policy, violence²² - seem to be suspended in these visual presentations in the masque. The play's scepticism about generalisations is demonstrated here in Webster's inversion of the traditional symbolism in using the Moor image to represent acceptance, purity, and "true beauty" (V.vi.49)²³. We cannot judge "true beauty" simply from the surface, and we must distrust rigid and falsifying conventions.

Hence vain show: I only care
 To preserve my soul most fair,
 Never mind the outward skin
 But the jewel that's within ...

(V.vi.38-41)

The Moor-image, then, may simply promise festivity: but Jolenta's disguise is a more complex symbolic expression of many strands of meaning in the play, and it performs more elaborate functions than simply setting her apart visually and promising a happy ending. Previously Jolenta had been very much a pawn in the bitter struggle between Leonora and Romelio. Now at last, by staging her own decisive fiction, she is able to engage our sympathies as a woman capable of choice. The masque is her equivalent of Romelio's duel or of Leonora's law-case, though it lacks their danger and the threat of tragedy. The masque insists that Jolenta too is capable of "action" and is not simply the play's passive victim. She is brought back into the centre of the play and is allowed to express, like her mother and brother, her sense of the conflict of appearance and reality by means of visual "action".

Again, Eldred Jones has pointed out that for the Jacobeans there was an "almost automatic association of Moors with sexuality"²⁴. By assuming this disguise Jolenta insists on her own ability to use "action", but also on her own sexual identity. Previously her definitions of womanhood and sexuality were tinged with negative elements of fiction and pretence: she accepts Romelio's lies about Contarino and Leonora, she pretends to be pregnant, she punningly lays claim to an incestuous relationship with her brother. The early part of the play bandies about a modish misogyny, seeing women and womanhood threatening the stable framework of society. Here Jolenta and Leonora bring good news and images of reconciliation, suggesting a more complex definition

of womanhood as pacifying as well as predatory, and creating a precarious synthesis of Jolenta's mildness and Leonora's passionate energy.

Jolenta's Moor-disguise also, of course, provides a dramatised metaphor for her "blackened" reputation so that the masque provides another confusion of metaphorical and literal truth before making the final separation as the play ends. Jolenta's speech pinpoints the theme of the conflict of appearance and reality, urging us in stylised couplets not to be blinded by appearances. The play has distrusted language, disguise, rigid genre-forms, and even theatricality itself, and we have just seen the abandonment of disguise, and of language, by Romelio and Contarino. Jolenta's metaphorical acceptance of disguise, however, reinstates the play as a fictional form in which it is nonetheless possible to tell the truth. Jolenta rejects "vain show" (V.vi.38), which prepares us for the ending of the show which is the play, but nonetheless she ends the play in disguise as a potent reminder of the power of fiction. It is impossible for us to escape the disquieting implications of the play by reading into its own form its expressed scepticism about the use of fictions. The play ends, as it begins in the introductory letter, with a balance between scepticism and confidence at its own fictional form. Jolenta's masque allows a complex visual account of the nature of fiction and the tragicomic ending: Jolenta, rejecting "vain show" and yet accepting that truth can be expressed through disguise and metaphor, ends the play with this equivocal view of its nature as fiction.

The juxtaposition of the white and black nuns in the

masque inevitably suggests a definition of the mixed nature of tragicomedy. H.R. Patch²⁵ has pointed out that in medieval iconography Fortune occasionally appeared with one black and one white face, illustrating her dual nature and her way of alternating good and bad luck. At least one Jacobean masque close in time to The Devil's Law-case, Middleton's The Inner Temple Masque, or The Masque of Heroes (6 Jan-2 Feb 1619) adopts this medieval iconography of fortune. Middleton's masque about time, mutability and fortune leads up to the appearance of the figure of Harmony and the masquers, nine "Heroes deified for their virtues"²⁶. Two anti-masques include abstractions from the calendar. Especially significantly, the second presents "the three Good Days, attired all in white garments", "the three Bad Days, all in black garments, their faces black" and "the Indifferent Days in garments half white half black, their faces seamed with that parti-colour"²⁷. Whether or not Webster is using Middleton's masque directly the motifs seem to be used in similar ways. Middleton's play presents anti-masques of fortune but the masque itself suggests that "virtues" escape from the arbitrary world of fortune. Webster's tragicomedy has opposite implications: even Jolenta's virtues cannot escape the reorganising power of fortune, the arbitrary way in which things happen. Angiolella and Jolenta in their masque stress the precarious nature of a world governed by chance and fortune, in a world where the "Good Days" promised by the comic ending are balanced by the "Bad Days" feared by tragedy and the "Indifferent Days" of the real life between them. The two nuns, one veiled and dressed in white, the other in black, her face painted black, provide a powerful symbol of the mixed tragicomic ending and its ambiguous treatment of fiction. As befits the

reticent ending of tragicomedy, the play ends with the anti-masque, not with the epiphany of the heroes deified for their virtues: there are none such in this dangerous tragicomic world.

As Contarino more or less silently accepts Leonora, Jolenta more or less silently accepts Ercole, the man who passes the test posed by the masque by refusing to judge Jolenta simply in terms of "vain show" (V.vi.38) and whom the fabric of the play throws up as her "sweet-heart" (V.i.29). The play honestly suggests that many of us have to be satisfied with second best but that chance may choose better for us than we can for ourselves. The play is sceptical about the power of the intellect and language, choice and judgement. Leonora is placed in the happy ending by being given precisely what she wanted in all its unworthiness: Jolenta is placed by being given the really worthy man she has tried to reject. These two definitions of the happy ending are unresolved, are simply placed side by side so that we as audience can assess their relative merits. Ercole is all too obviously a nobler character than Contarino, prepared as he is to extend the meaning of honour beyond the surface by agreeing to father Jolenta's child, and to pass this final test by abandoning "vain show". Like Bassanio in The Merchant of Venice Ercole is asked to choose between appearances and reality, and like Bassanio he brings about the happy ending by rejecting "vain show" (V.vi.38). Jolenta's staging of the masque is not a "gratuitous statement"²⁸ about false appearances or a piece of moral special pleading, but a test of the man Jolenta has come silently to love, a final attempt to attain happiness through "action", a statement about the operation of fortune in the tragicomic world, and a complex and concise discussion through visual symbols about the ambiguous nature of fiction and of tragicomedy.

Little remains now in the scene except the tying up of a few loose ends. Leonora hands over a letter, a blatantly fictional device which seems to reduce the whole past to the status of words on a page, the written fiction which is now for us all that the play is. In the last forty lines the central characters have very little to say: Leonora presents her letter, Romelio agrees to make restitution, Angiolella gives some practical advice to "honest virgins" (V.vi.78). It seems as if the actors are already stepping out of their roles, shedding their fictional individuality as a preparation for the end of the play, moving from actors to an audience for Ariosto's sententious conclusion. "Action" on stage is replaced by comment on the significance of the action as Ariosto sums up the precariousness of the comic ending and its "rareness and difficulty" (V.vi.59), and allots appropriate punishments, mostly token ones.

However one important effect remains, Ariosto's definition of the genre-category of the play. He insists that the "action" has presented "these so comical events" (V.vi.62), as earlier the surgeon had planned the masque to "discover/The comical event" (V.iii.28-9). Romelio accedes to this definition by accepting that he is "happy too" (V.vi.27) and by agreeing to marry Angiolella "most willingly" (V.vi.75). Finally Julio plans to go to sea "with a rare consort/Of music" (V.vi.70-1). In the final scene the definition of comedy, of reconciliation and reunion, masque and music, collides with reservations about fiction, and the deliberate dubiousness of the reforming relationships. The comic form remains, but it is extended by these tragicomic discords, creating an honest sense of the precariousness of comedy which increases its poignancy and its intensity.

Conclusion

The ending of The Devil's Law-case, it seems to me, has been widely misinterpreted because it has not been considered in the context of Webster's tragicomic practice, or in terms of its visual and spectacular elements, its "grace ... in Action" (To the Judicious Reader ls 14-15), which Webster himself suggested was so important. The ending does not impose an "insipid pairing-off"²⁹: the last thing any relationship involving Leonora is is insipid. On the one hand the play prepares us to some extent for the new relationships, as I have suggested. On the other hand Webster deliberately refuses to allow the people of the play, people realised with so much clarity and compassion, to be cramped into the rigid genre-form of comedy or of tragedy. Webster suggests but abandons the tidy ending, and we are left with an honest and unconsoling vision of an untidy world where human intellect and language fail, and where "Chance, not prudence, makes us fortunate"³⁰.

The Devil's Law-case does not, as is most typical of Fletcherian tragicomedy, reach its ambiguous conclusion by the revelation of surprising facts. Its forging of surprising relationships, though, has the same kind of effect in the way it changes the audience-play relationship just as the play ends. As Jolenta presents her masque and "takes out" Ercole the play's dynamic characters Romelio and Leonora sink into our own role as audience, and as we watch ourselves watching we are warned of the fictional nature of the play and are prepared for the impending end of our role as observers.

The Devil's Law-case mediates for its audience between

the fiction and the return to real life with an unusual degree of complexity. Its definitions of genre are complicated and analytic. Throughout the play comic and tragic impulses collide in tragicomic discords and double-visions, and the final scene turns upside down a number of comic motifs: hierarchies are inverted, for instance, as the older woman wins the young man. The play's insistence on its own "comical" identity is tinged with irony: we are forced to examine from all sides the significance of a "comical" ending which is nonetheless so reticent and imperfect, "survival and not salvation"³¹. The play suggests various kinds of tidy endings, that of romantic comedy or of tragedy, or of the heroic epiphanies of Middleton's masque of heroes; none of these, however, is allowed to happen, and against them the complex, unsentimental ending of the play gains in power.

The play directs its audience from the world of the play to the world of the theatre by its complex genre description, its movement away from fiction, its use of images of the audience in the play, and our growing disengagement from the play's people as they abandon fiction and we come to look at them increasingly externally. Especially important, though, is the play's treatment of action and language. The world of the play is one where language is deceptive, by turns too crude and too subtle for man's purposes. The play shows the ways in which language can be misunderstood, in which metaphor inappropriately used is mistaken for literal truth and literal truth for metaphor, where lies disturbingly turn into truth and the truth into lies, and where riddles and equivocations seem the only way to express an ambiguous world. The fifth act of the play turns against language and tries to express feeling and thought instead through "action"

and through spectacle. The play carries almost to its limit the tendency of Jacobean tragicomedy to make increasingly incomplete statements in the face of the scepticism imposed by the tragicomic vision: the last scene of Measure for Measure, for instance, is full of curious silences. In The Devil's Law-case the strategy of explaining through spectacle is to an astonishing extent successful: Jolenta's masque allows even discussion of the nature of the play to be carried on in these primarily visual terms. The play becomes increasingly something to see, and what cannot be expressed in visual terms, Jolenta's precise feelings for Ercole, or Contarino's for Leonora, are not expressed at all. We are now judging the play's people as we judge people in real life, seeing what they do and hearing what they say, but conscious that we are faced with only part of the truth. The fantastic and unlikely events of The Devil's Law-case are finally replaced by a world very like that outside the play, and the audience is directly prepared for their return to real life.

Most of the tragicomedies I have considered up to now end with a banishment of fiction and the return to real life. The Tempest leaves the "bare island" (Epilogue 1.8) of the stage, the fiction of The Malcontent crumbles as "the rest of idle actors idly part" (V.iv.194). The ending of The Devil's Law-case is more ambiguous. Fiction has been presented as threatening and untrustworthy, and it is abandoned as Romelio and Contarino throw off their disguises. To some extent, however, Jolenta's masque reinstates fiction. The rejection of "vain show" (V.vi.38) prepares for the ending of the "show" of the play but at the same time Jolenta nonetheless ends the play affirming fiction, still wearing her symbolic disguise. The audience is urged to look

critically and in detail at the theatrical fiction: we are not to be taken in by its "vain show", but we are not to reject it altogether and to forget that fiction can tell the truth. The play's mediation for the audience between its own fictional nature and the inevitable return to real life is unusually comprehensive. Not only are we returned from the fantastic events of the play to our seats in the theatre, but we are also not allowed to forget that even the "vain show" of the theatrical fiction has a significance which remains vivid and important even at the return to real life.

NOTES

1. The Dramatic Works of William Davenant Vol V, edited by James Maidment and W.H. Logan, Edinburgh 1874, p.292. Theocles tells Philander

Cousin, the Princess does herself bestow
On me, so that whatsoever debt you say,
You, in affection, still to her may owe,
You are obliged in honour not to pay.
2. As well as The Devil's Law-case and A Cure for a Cuckold, Webster may have had a hand in The Fair Maid of the Inn (See Lucas, op cit, vol 1V). ~~From Appius and Virginia, to which Webster seems to have contributed a little, is based on a later tragical comedy.~~
3. Elizabeth Brennan, The Devil's Law-Case (New Mermaid ed 1975), p.xvii.
4. V.iii.29, V.vi.62. And see Appendix.
5. William Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral (1935), p.229.
6. cf. Fletcher's A Wife for a Moneth, where the poison administered by the Usurper's henchman actually cures the melancholia of the Duke. This is a very significant device in tragicomedy, one of whose main themes is the delusiveness of action.
7. "Honour" e.g. at l.i.89, and "manly" at l.ii.89.
8. W.H. Auden, "The Epigoni" (Collected Shorter Poems 1966 p.303).
9. Cf. DLC 111.ii.1 - 16 with The Jew of Malta 11.iii.179-206.
10. Ralph Berry, The Art of John Webster (1972) p.165. "The fabric of tragedy dissolves, the theme of evil rebuked by the law melts into an insipid pairing off and we are left with a conclusion that appears to invite the least charitable of the

- epithets that are customarily applied to tragicomedy".
11. Doran, Endeavors of Art (Madison 1954) p.354.
 12. See W.K. Wimsatt ed., Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare 1969, p.105.
 13. Brennan op. cit., p.3. Massinger's tragicomedy The Maid of Honour turns on the fact that the order was monastic.
 14. Cf. Ben Jonson's masque, Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue (1618) which starts from this motif.
 15. P.B. Murray, A Study of John Webster (The Hague 1969) p.211.
 16. D.C. Gunby, "The Devil's Law-case: An Interpretation" (MLR lxxiii 1968) p.558.
 17. Lucas, op. cit., vol 11, p.224.
 18. Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" (English Institute Essays 1948) p.58.
 19. P.B. Murray, op. cit., p.212.
 20. Gunnar Boklund, "The Devil's Law case: an End or a Beginning?" (Mermaid Critical Commentaries, Morris ed. 1970, John Webster) p.124.
 21. Sydney Anglo, Spectacle, Pageantry and Tudor Policy (1969) p.177.
 22. For the symbolic connotations of the Moor see Eldred Jones, Othello's Countrymen, (1965) - and cf Zanche in The White Devil.
 23. Cf. the similar use in Jonson's The Masque of Blackness - "in their black, the perfectst beauty groes . . ." (Ben Jonson, eds Herford and Simpson, 1925-52, vol vii, p.173, 1.144).
 24. Jones, op. cit., p.71.
 25. H.R. Patch, The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature (Harvard UP, 1927) p.43.

26. A Book of Masques: In honour of Allardyce Nicoll (Ewbank and Hunter, eds, 1967) p.267, ls 323-4.
27. A Book of Masques op. cit., p.266, ls 269,277, 285-6.
28. P.B. Murray, op. cit., p.212.
29. Berry, op. cit., p.165.
30. Etherege, The Comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub, V.v.158.
31. Gunnar Boklund, op. cit., p.126.

CHAPTER NINE

"Riddles and Paradoxes": the tragicomic ending of A Cure for a Cuckold

Where The Devil's Law-case shows tragicomedy strongly challenged by tragedy, A Cure for a Cuckold by Webster and William Rowley¹ undercuts tragicomedy by the secure comic control of the plot centred on Compass. The play is described on its title page as a "Pleasant Comedy", and it contains many of the structures and images of comedy: many of the characters, for instance, pass through symbolic death to rebirth². However it uses the vocabulary of comedy less extensively than Webster's two tragedies, or even than The Devil's Law-case³. In A Cure for a Cuckold "merry" is the comedy-word most frequently used, and its synonym "pleasant" is also repeated⁴. The play, because of its more simply comic tone and structure, seems not to need to define its comic nature as directly or as stridently as The Devil's Law-case, and it uses the language of comedy most extensively in scenes, like the first, where the comic tone is precarious. The plot involving Compass, where the comic tone is stable enough to allow him to stage a metaphorical passage through death, uses the comic vocabulary very sparsely⁵.

The rest of the play, where the comic control is less secure, uses the language of comedy much more extensively. In its uncertainty about its own generic status the play, and especially the tragicomic plot, probes continually at its own tone or mood. Especially in the early part of the play one character repeatedly declares that he is "merry" or "pleasant", or that another character is, or asks another whether he is "merry" or

"pleasant", or urges him to be⁶. In a play really certain of its own comic nature this constant redefinition would seem unnecessary. The comedy-words used tend to be subdued: there is little reference to laughter and none at all to comedy. Moreover they are often subdued even further by a context which undermines or contradicts them, compares them with sadness, or uses them ironically or aggressively. Woodruff unsuccessfully attempts to moderate Bonvile's anger against Annabel and to control the last scene's disquieting outburst of violent emotion by laughing (V.1.237) and by describing the situation "in laughter" (V.1.235). "Mock", the most obvious example of the tools of comedy used aggressively, is also repeated throughout the play⁷.

Even the play's most characteristic comedy-words "merry" and "pleasant" tend to be suggested only to be denied. The first scene is especially rich in this kind of definition by opposites: tragicomic discords are established from the first moments. The play opens with the comic image of ending, the wedding festivity. Characteristic of tragicomedy, though, the play dislocates the comic logic by placing this image of achievement at the beginning, and fitting the play of doubt and danger between the nominal festivity and its real accomplishment. Tension is implicit in the whole first scene which is placed, as P.B. Murray points out, between the celebration and the consummation of a marriage⁸.

The wedding festivity itself is disrupted by the pain, selfishness and mutual recriminations of Clare and Lessingham. Lessingham in an entirely egocentric attempt to claim that he has bought Clare by his "services" (1.1.49) sees Bonvile's wedding

wedding day as a time of "Mirth" (1.1.5). Clare sulkily insists that it is so only "For such as can be merry" (1.1.6): she herself is "sad" (1.1.23), afflicted by "Melancholy" (1.1.55,89) and "sadness" (1.1.103). The opening moments place the events in this context of tragicomic discords. The play begins as it ends with comic motifs of marriage and music, but comedy is almost immediately qualified by Clare's curt refusals to join it and by Lessingham's narrow self-centredness. The multiple vision of the play, its deflation both of the dignity of tragedy and of the highly-charged emotionalism of tragicomedy, begins in this context of clashing tones, selfishness, and hostility.

The multiple plot in *A Cure for a Cuckold*.

Despite its collaborative authorship, the play's two plots are carefully used to cast significant light on each other. The two strands, although only linked indirectly in terms of plot - Frankford the father of Mrs. Compass's child is Annabel's uncle and a guest at her wedding - are directly related in terms of theme and language. Compass the cured cuckold is more than a character in the sub-plot. In the main plot the young people mistrust each other, experiment with extreme poses, bicker and equivocate. In the sub-plot Compass forgives his erring wife and accepts her child with not only forbearance but enthusiasm, and every obstacle to their happiness goes down before him. The effect of this tolerant and good-humoured plot, which accepts and controls various kinds of breakdown in society and in human relationships, indirectly rebukes the excesses of the tragicomic plot and, as I shall suggest, exposes its blatant theatricality. Moreover Compass's control over his own plot is so secure that it

even extends outwards into the tragicomic plot, so that in an almost magical sense it seems at his final entrance that he is responsible for the happy ending. As P.B. Murray has pointed out⁹, Compass represents the emotional education and maturing of Clare and Lessingham, Bonville and Annabel: his return in the final scene marks the reassertion of the comic spirit, of reason, measure, and "Compass". As the background of madmen forms a commentary on Beatrice-Joanna's moral insanity in The Changeling, so the Compass plot provides a norm of sanity and moderation to which the play will at last return, and a paradigm for the comic process.

The two plots are more precisely linked by significant themes and by the repetition of significant words. The word "Compass" especially is repeated as a link between the plots. At the end of Act 1 Scene 1 strong reservations have been suggested about the wedding festivity by the bitter quarrelling of Lessingham and Clare and her refusal to marry. Luce Frankford comments on another imperfect marriage relationship, her own with her adulterous husband, and puns obscenely that her husband has nonetheless kept himself "within compass" (1.1.201). More seriously, at one of the most highly charged moments of the play Annabel realises the horror of her situation at the mysterious disappearance, and perhaps death, of her husband. She is, she exclaims, a "Miserable creature! a Maid, a Wife,/And Widow in the compass of two days" (111.3.23-4). The pain and danger are modified, however, by this ironic reference to the safety of the comic subplot: this repetition of words so solidly associated with the comic plot adds an ironic commentary to the extreme emotions of the tragicomic plot. Again in 1V.2, the returned Bonville

praises Lessingham to Clare as one "Led by the Compass of a noble heart" (1V.2.201), and again this reference to another kind of plot and tone modifies the violence and vindictiveness of the tragicomic plot.

Another motif which links the two plots is the characteristically Websterian one of the lost way. In the tragicomic plot especially characters repeatedly express their sense of disorientation and doubt in this very direct image. Lessingham at the beginning of the play feels himself "in a Labyrinth (1.1.68). Annabel had "lost [her] way" (11.4.86) when she first met Rochfield, Bonville is "lost" to Lessingham (111.1.134), Annabel fears that by Bonville's departure she is "lost, lost ... for ever" (111.3.12) and Clare feels that because of Lessingham's misinterpretation of her commission she is "lost for ever" (1V.2.36). On the other hand Compass, who is not "one that's lost" but "one that's found agen" (11.4.25,26) shows the road to the people of the main plot. The pun on a compass, which enables us to find directions, is not made directly by the play, but seems to lie beneath the surface¹⁰. With the help of this "Compass" Clare, herself one of those lost in the early part of the play, can become "the clew/To lead you forth this Labyrinth" (V.1.348-9).

The play develops tragicomic discords, then, by its use of clashing meanings of words like "compass" and "lost", words which are used to tone down the danger, bitterness and incoherence of the main plot and which provide strong hints at the coming happy ending. More important, each plot deals with a similar motif: each turns on a paradox. I shall discuss this at greater length later: at the moment I simply want to point out that the main characters of each plot are placed in a paradoxical position.

Compass is both a cuckold and not a cuckold, married and unmarried, and his wife is simultaneously wife and widow: their "divorce" (1V.1.214) marks their reconciliation. Lessingham has and has not murdered Bonvile. Rochfield is an "honest thief" (11.2.8), Annabel is both wife and virgin (11.2.18). The world of the play is created in paradoxes like this. Paradox also spills over into the play's ironic inversion of genres. The comic sub-plot of cuckoldry turns out to be more convincing, more dignified and more genuinely concerned with love and understanding than the tragicomic plot with its selfishness, pettiness and misunderstanding, and it is the comic hero and not the tragicomic hero who points the right way to live in society comfortably and forgivingly. Of these "Riddles and Paradoxes" (1.2.46) only Compass is securely in control: he devises the paradox of divorce leading to reconciliation and uses it to produce the comic ending. Bonvile, like Compass, devises his own metaphorical death but he handles it less securely and constructively. Rochfield's paradoxical position as "honest thief" is partly thrust upon him and partly chosen, while Annabel's painfully ambiguous position as wife and virgin is forced on her by circumstance. The play depends on Compass to show ways of using the paradoxical situation positively and constructively, as a way of reaching the happy ending.

In A Cure for a Cuckold, then, Compass with his moderation and compassion, his stress on human relationships and his control of metaphor, represents the comic spirit pointing out to the play's disturbed young people ways of achieving the happy ending. The play develops in a series of tragicomic discords created between the two plots. Between the two plots too is the buffer

plot with Rochfield the "honest thief" (11.2.8) who distinguishes himself in a sea-fight and who becomes a Heywoodian middle-class hero¹¹. Like the Compass plot, this allows an inversion of the usual hierarchies: the violent and bitter young people are saved from real disaster by a cuckolded sailor and a failed thief.

Tragicomic discords, though, do not exist simply between the plots and in the complex system of comparison and repetition which they create. The Compass plot is solidly comic in its control and its honest acceptance of imperfection. Nonetheless, danger and tragedy are lightly suggested. When he has first returned to Blackwall, Compass talks about children conceived out of wedlock and barren marriages, and the two boys sympathetically find this "horrible" and "pitiful" (11.3.48,52), suggesting the reactions of tragedy. However Compass's security defeats these suggestions and creates a moving climate of restrained emotions, allowing him to be "merry" (11.3.112,113) even when he learns of his wife's illegitimate child.

The Compass plot is particularly rich and moving because of Compass's mature tolerance and generous feeling. Moreover, the plot expands its field of reference to allude not only to tragedy but to different kinds of comedy. The subject matter might lead us to expect the tone and interests of city comedy: the plot of the cheerful cuckold, for instance, could have been slanted along the lines of the Kix plot in Middleton's A Chaste Maid in Cheapside. Some of the props of city comedy are there - the class conflict, the chatty, anecdotal style, the sense of location. At the same time, though, the plot explores a slightly unexpected area of feeling - that of Shakesperean romance. Compass goes through the fundamental romance process, the passage through death

to rebirth, not once but twice. He appears at Blackwall having been feared dead - "I heard thou wert div'd to th'bottom of the sea/ Never to come to Black-wall agen" (11.iii.93-5), but he is in fact reborn: "I am new come into the world, and children cry before they laugh ..." (11.3.88-9). Later in the play he enacts a metaphorical death - "I will go hang myself two hours" (1V.i.221) before finally reborn to marry Urse and accept her illegitimate child. Not only, though, does Compass undergo this basic process of romance: he also seems to attract some of the imagery of romance. He is a sailor and like Pericles or Prospero he is surrounded by marine imagery. In the play as in Pericles or The Tempest the sea is threatening but also saving; it had seemed to swallow Compass but in fact returned him, and Urse to achieve her happy ending is to "drown" herself metaphorically (1V.1.221)¹². Finally Compass, like Marina or Perdita, is miraculously returned to his loved ones, one who "was lost" but is now "found agen" (11.4.25-7). The Compass plot guides the top plot towards its happy ending, and produces something of the resonance of Shakesperean romance by using the materials of city comedy.

Compass's tolerance and acceptance of the natural impulse rebukes the self-absorption of the young people and their self-consciously posed extremes. Parts of the top plot have a real tragicomic power: the scene on Calais sands and Clare's painful sense of disorientation and loss, recall the sombre riddling world of The Devil's Law-case. The plot uses one of the favourite dilemmas of Jacobean tragicomedy and poses it starkly and in extreme form: which is man to prefer, love or friendship?¹³ When the play opens Lessingham's ideas of both seem to be askew. He seems to believe that he is entitled to Clare's love which he has

bought with his "services" (1.1.49), and that she has little choice in the matter. Again, he seems to believe that his friends exist primarily to render service to him. In his rigid world of reward and punishment the irrational impulse seems to have no place. Clare, on the other hand, seems totally absorbed in her own irrational impulses. Her "perverse and peevish will" (1.1.57) makes her incapable of love or friendship: her brief bored or hurt replies to Lessingham's insistence shows her self-centredness. A major theme of this tragicomic plot is self-absorption, and the self-absorbed man or woman's choice of which pose to adopt, and his eventual return to the community. Tragicomic conventions according to which the hero behaves with total self-sacrifice are treated ironically. Lessingham does not seem to undergo any real torment over deciding whether to accept Clare's conditions. Even Bonvile, who leaves his marriage unconsummated in order to help his friend, has his motives questioned: the worst he imagines for himself is not death but only the loss of "pleasure", which anyway "is not lost for ever - but adjourned/For more mature employment" (1.2.183-5). This deflation of high romantic disinterest shows the characters reaching out to devise roles for themselves in the shifting world of the play. Bonvile's attempt to unite the realistic and the romantic produces only uneasy compromise and bathos. Like Fletcher's tragicomedies, the main plot of A Cure for a Cuckold diverts our attention in the direction of "the small, the mean, the average"¹⁴.

The play develops tragicomic discords, then, through the contrast of the two plots, and also by extending the tone of each plot: the Compass plot builds up the motifs of romance through the material of city comedy, the Clare-Lessingham plot deflates the

pretensions of romantic tragicomedy by its characters' uncertainty and selfishness. They need Compass and the values of his plot to lead them out of the "Labyrinth" (V.1.349) of ignorance and self-will. This movement towards the happy ending, though, is shown especially clearly in the play's treatment of literal and metaphorical language, of riddles and equivocations.

"Riddles and Paradoxes": literal and metaphorical language in A Cure for a Cuckold.

Characteristically of tragicomedy, in A Cure for a Cuckold the action is modified by language, and by the theme of the inadequacy of language and the point where metaphor breaks down. The play asks us to think again about the meanings of perfectly ordinary words like "father" and "friend". Frankford is literally the father of Urse's child, but the play insists that Compass, with his genuine and direct expressions of feeling, is its symbolic father. Again, as in A King and No King, whole situations are created and then destroyed semantically. Rochfield is a "thief" not because he has ever stolen anything but because he calls himself a "thief". Bonville changes completely Clare's feelings for him simply by using the word "whore" (1V.2.214)¹⁵. The Compass plot extols, among other things, his power over language and metaphor. In 1V.1, Compass's control of metaphor convinces the lawyers and even Frankford that the child belongs to its mother. His vital metaphors of "the earth" (1V.1.172), the "Crop of Wheat or Rye" (1V.L.163), the "summer tree" (1V.1.166), "Apple s." (1V.1.168), and boars and sows defeat Frankford's rather sterile imagery of commerce, law and money (1V.1.37-9). Even in

the final scene he playfully uses riddles and paradoxes before returning to more literal modes of expression. In a play where metaphor and misunderstanding of metaphor can appear so threatening, Compass is the one character who infallibly uses metaphor to produce the happy ending.

Compass can use language, metaphor, and the deliberately enacted fiction as part of his firm comic control. In the main plot metaphor turns out to be more difficult to distinguish and more difficult to use. Bonvile, for instance, undergoes a metaphorical death like Compass's, and does it at least in part in order to renew an endangered marriage relationship. Here, though, the passage through deaths leads much less directly to the happy ending, and its metaphors are threatening as well as saving. Lessingham has "slain [his] friend" (111.1.141,143) by destroying not Bonvile but Bonvile's friendship for him. And Bonvile takes the quibble a stage further by refusing to sail back to England with his ex-friend because "'tis dangerous living/ At sea, with a dead body" (111.1.167-8). Here metaphor provides an escape from real disaster although it continues to carry overtones of violence and resentment.

The most dangerous example in the play of the ambiguous power of words is Clare's command to Lessingham. Callous, willful, uncertain of her own feelings, Clare attempts to clarify them by making her lover clarify his:-

Prove all thy Friends, finde out the best and nearest,
Kill for my sake that Friend that loves the(e) dearest.

(1.1.118-119).

The instruction, which sets up the characteristic conflict between love and friendship, had been used before and was to be used

again in Jacobean tragicomedy. In Marston's The Dutch Courtesan, Franceschina promises herself to Malheureux if he will kill her ex-lover Frevil who has abandoned her and whom she now hates. Malheureux toys with the idea, is almost persuaded to do it by considering the sordid nature of life, but finally chooses friendship and tells all to Frevil, and the two men stage an elaborate pretence of quarrel and murder. In Massinger's The Parliament of Love Leonora, whose lover Claremond had tried to rape her, seeks to revenge herself by offering reconciliation only if he will murder his best friend. He agrees, but loses the fight, although his friend Montrose good-naturedly pretends death and the lovers are eventually reunited and reconciled.

All three plays pose the dilemma in the most extreme terms possible. In all three cases the man to be killed is the best friend, and moreover a best friend who has just gained the woman he truly loves. A Cure for a Cuckold even places the duel on the wedding night so that Bonvile's decision is not only a moral but also a sexual one. However there are significant differences in the way the three plays formulate the actual condition. In The Dutch Courtesan Franceschina names an actual person: what she wants is the death of Frevil, and causing pain to Malheureux is very secondary. In The Parliament of Love Leonora gives her command simply to punish Claremond. In A Cure for a Cuckold, although Lessingham does not realise it at first, Clare's condition provides him not only with a task to perform but also with a "riddle" (1V.2.160) to solve. It is the only one of these three plays where the command is given in writing: mistakes of meaning are all too likely when we do not have actions or tone of voice to explain the meaning of words. Clare is fond of trying to simplify her own violent and chaotic feelings by reducing them to words on a page: in 1V.2 she hands Bonvile a letter explaining

her situation and motives. In her commission to Lessingham her attempt to solidify her feelings through language leads to disastrous misunderstanding. One of the things she must learn before she can become "the clew/To lead you forth this Labyrinth" (V.1.349) is how to use and evaluate words.

In The Dutch Courtesan Malheureux goes through a period of painful rationalising and self-division before he decides what to do about Franceschina's command, and even Montrose in The Parliament of Love argues with himself before undertaking Leonora's command. Lessingham tacitly accepts Clare's conditions: his only problem is the "strange difficulty" (1.1.122) of deciding which of his friends loves him best. He is "full of thoughts" (1.2.25), aware that to murder his friend would make him a "Monster" (1.2.5), but he does not seriously think of disobeying. Indeed he is cool and detached about the choice he is offered. He does not see it in terms of real feeling at all, only imagining "a brave fight" between "Love and Friendship" (1.2.29). This external, calculating, aestheticising approach to feeling is characteristic of the main plot. It seems as if the really challenging conflict is not, as in The Dutch Courtesan, between "Love and Friendship", but rather between the clashing meanings of Clare's ambiguous command.

As I have suggested, Clare's condition provides a riddle as well as a task. Throughout the play multiple meanings are suggested for it. Lessingham suggests that she has a "hidden purpose" (1.2.13), perhaps to demonstrate her "fantasie" (1.2.15) that there is no such thing as friendship: when the gallants refuse to get involved in the duel Lessingham believes she has proved her point. In the scene of the duel Bonville too sees

Clare's ultimatum as the centre of a tissue of double meanings. He insists that "she does Equivocate" (111.1.86) and that her command has a metaphorical rather than a literal meaning.

Her meaning is, you cherish in your breast
 Either self-love, or pride, as your best friend,
 And she wishes you'd kill that.

(111.1.87-9).

Lessingham, though, is now convinced that the ultimatum is to be taken literally - "her Command/Is more bloody ..." (111.1.90-1). In this disquieting world it is impossible to distinguish the different meanings of words.

In 111.i the literal and metaphorical meanings of words clash repeatedly: Lessingham supports their literal meaning, Bonvile their metaphorical. Lessingham's self-centredness seems to blind him to the metaphorical meanings of words. Bonvile insists that he wears a "privie Coat" (111.1.101), which Lessingham takes literally until Bonvile explains it as a reference to the justice of his cause. Finally Bonvile insists that Lessingham has fulfilled Clare's instructions, metaphorically at least, by killing their friendship. Literal and metaphorical interpretations of language collide: Lessingham's solution of violence is set against Bonvile's more intellectual solution to the riddle. Metaphor is confusing and deceptive, but it nonetheless averts violence and prepares for the happy ending.

Even after 111.1, a crucial scene for establishing the relationship between literal and metaphorical in the world of the play, alternate explanations continue to be given to Clare's command. In 111.3, hearing about the duel, Clare is horrified to discover that her instructions have been misinterpreted: "Thou hast mistook my injunction utterly ..." (111.3.14). Finally she

explains her own "bloody Riddle" (111.3.30) by revealing to the amazed Lessingham that her hopeless love for Bonvile led her to seek her own death, and that she had wished Lessingham to kill her "unwittingly" (V.2.79,166)¹⁶. Confused and disorientated, Clare is alternately horrified and gratified by the supposed death of Bonvile, and is striking around for some kind of convincing explanation for her own destructive use of equivocation. Clare's riddle has multiple meanings: her confusion about her own feelings, and the instability of her emotions, lead her to formulate the ambiguous riddle as the only way of expressing her pain. She is rescued from the morasse of double-meanings and uncertainty only by the help of those whose power over words is more secure than her own - directly by Bonvile and by Rochfield, indirectly by Compass.

In A Cure for a Cuckold the tragicomic progression from fiction to fact, from metaphorical to literal, and from play to real life, is a complicated one. Act V is especially complex in its fast-moving interchanges of fiction and fact. This is surprising, because by the end of Act IV it looks very much as if metaphor has already given way to literal truth, and as if disguise and pretence are coming to an end. The Compass plot only needs the marriage ceremony to reach its happy ending. Clare's riddle has been solved, and so has Bonvile's as he returns from his metaphorical death. It seems that the surprise we expect in Fletcherian tragicomic endings has been pushed forward into the fourth act, as the riddles are solved. The fifth act, though, finds a new way of treating the play's confusion of illusion and reality, and the tragicomic surprise.

For most of its length A Cure for a Cuckold insists upon

its theatrical nature. Theatricality seems not threatening as it did in The Devil's Law-case but a valid way of expressing feeling and of consolidating the happy ending. Compass and Urse stage their own play within the play by separating and rejoining to marry again. Compass, like Romelio, is surrounded by play imagery, but unlike Romelio he uses fiction not as a threat but as a way of expressing feeling. He objects to losing the child simply because he is not its physical father -

There's better Law amongst the Players yet;
for a fellow shall have his share though he do not play
that day.

(11.3.137-9).

In the scene with the lawyers Compass sees violence and immorality confined to a fictional context. Pettifog begins an obscene story about an informer who is infected by a prostitute, and Compass breaks in -

A Tweak, or Bronstrops - I learnt that name in a Play
(1V.1.123-4).

Rowley makes a good joke by referring back to his own play, A Fair Quarrel¹⁷, in order to imply the unreality and irrelevance of this fictional background of violence and vice to the comic security of the Compasses. It is also hinted that the violence of the main plot simply has the status of a "Play", which is the only context the Compass plot recognises for this kind of violence and immorality. The final scene also seems to recognise its nature as a "Play" and to be wholly conscious of its own theatricality.

The world of A Cure for a Cuckold, then, defines itself extensively through verbal ambiguity, metaphor and theatricality. In the first four acts the Compass plot promises the happy ending in its ability to control metaphor and its frank acceptance of

theatricality. By the end of Act Four it seems that riddles have been solved and danger more or less escaped. The last act integrates the two plots, makes its final definitions of genre, and leads the audience out of the tragicomic world. In the final act consciousness of theatricality and control of metaphor spread out from the sub-plot, and allow the play to reach its happy ending.

"All's now as at first it was wisht to be": the audience and the tragicomic ending of A Cure for a Cuckold.

The Devil's Law case, like The Tempest and The Duchess of Malfi, is interested in the nature of ending and uses analytically the image of the ending of the play. A Cure for a Cuckold is more interested in beginnings. The play constantly talks about the youth of its participants and uses imagery of childhood and childbirth, inexperience, and education. The version of the play made by Edmund Gosse by excising the sub-plot at least continued to suggest this important strand of imagery in the title, Love's Graduate¹⁸. Rochfield the honest thief is making his "beginning" (11.2.44) as a robber, "a young Physician" (11.2.52), a "Fresh-man" (11.2.42), and Annabel too sees herself as "so yong and ignorant a Scholar" (11.2.30). Clare starts the play by insisting that she has no intention of becoming "graduate" (1.1.22) in the art of love: at the end her acceptance of Lessingham seems to represent her maturing and graduation. Even the ending of the play optimistically attracts the imagery of beginnings - children, and the new beginning promised by Compass's remarriage. The ending of the play points back very clearly to its own beginning.

Una Ellis-Fermor sees A Cure for a Cuckold as a moderately successful play "until frivolous complications of plot and contradictions of character destroy the fifth act"¹⁹. In the first four acts the tragicomic plot generates convincing emotions through its web of equivocations and its imagery of danger and despair: in the fifth act, though, the mode seems to have been changed. It is becoming more blatantly aware of its own theatricality, presenting its extreme antitheses not in terms of convincing emotions but in obviously, even parodically, fictional terms. The act develops as a series of highly charged scenes played to more moderate audiences, to Annabel, Rochfield or Woodruff. Danger, less pressing and less challenging than in The Devil's Law-case, is distanced and controlled by being presented in the form of parody.

The last scene of the play opens with Annabel's easy tolerance. She refuses to believe that her new husband's behaviour is due to "unkindness" (V.1.9): as a supporter of genuine feeling against the sterile gesture she decides that his "business" (V.1.12) might be more important than any merely "formal Complement" (V.1.14) to her. This tolerance, however, is disrupted by Lessingham who enters bringing with him suggestions of tragedy so emphatic and inapposite as to be tinged with parody - "The ways to Love, and Crowns, lye both through blood..." (V.1.22). The scene sets up the grand gestures of tragedy in increasingly extreme form only to knock them down, and to suggest more moderate ways of behaving. Tragicomic discords are set up between fact and fiction, between one pose and another. We as audience are detached from the plot and its people by its growing sense of its own theatricality, and we are prepared not only for

the entrance of sanity with Compass, but also for the ending of fiction as the play ends. It is by using these "frivolous complications" that the people in the play, and their audience, learn to distinguish between conscious theatricality and a moderation suggesting that of real life: perhaps the play's "complications" which dissipate the danger of the tragicomic plot and clarify the relationship between fiction and everyday life, are not simply "frivolous".

Lessingham has adopted the role of villainous machiavel and is playing it to the hilt, just too elegantly to be convincing. He copies Iago²⁰ in his use of elaborate parturition imagery:

I am grown big with project ...
 A speedy birth fills me with painful throwes,
 And I am now in labour ...

(V.1.25,27-8)

In a play which has used the imagery of birth and children to express love and the return to harmony, and where the comic plot has turned on the paternity of a child, Lessingham's exercise in tragic imagery is ironically undermined. We are forced to stop for a minute to consider the relationship between the two plots, and the contrast between Compass's forgiveness of his wife and Lessingham's uneasy jealousy. The last act insists on this tragicomic double-vision, and despite one or two moments of convincing pain, more and more emphasis is placed on the comic half of the antithesis.

In its final scene the play continues the process of moving the audience from fiction to real life by grotesquely overstating the theatrical poses of long-suffering wife, jealous husband, and villainous malcontent, and its self-conscious and

allusive theatricality insists that what we are watching is a play. Lessingham attempts a tragic interpretation of the action, planning a "brave revenge" (V.1.37), but the fragility of his assumed character and the tortuously formal language he uses to his Cassio, Rochfield, tip over into parody. Far from being a credulous victim, too, Rochfield has seen plays like this before and is fully aware of what is going on. He refuses to remain a passive victim but rather shares Lessingham's role as manipulator, recognising "some plot to wrong the Bride" (V.1.98), and deliberately misleading the misleader by uniting "Craft with Cunning" (V.1.99). The world of the play is one in which fictions are benevolent as often as not and almost every character at some point uses fiction, or fact so tortuously expressed as to be indistinguishable from it.

Lessingham temporarily drops Iago as his model and begins to act Mephistophilis²¹:

If I drowne, Ile sink some along with me;
 For of all miseries I hold that chief,
 Wretched to be, when none coparts our grief
 (V.1.128-30).

He approaches Woodruff with the fiction he has devised, determined to make this work of malice and deceit his "Master-piece" (V.1.133), like Lodovico in The White Devil²². He resumes the equivocating mode with Clare had used earlier in the play and which Rochfield has just attempted. Lessingham now speaks in "Riddles" (V.1.158), suggesting that Bonvile is at the same time unhurt and "dangerously wounded" (V.1.150). He goes on to explain his own riddle, that Bonvile, now miraculously reinstated as his "best friend" (V.1.164), is wounded only metaphorically, "in his Reputation" (V.1.160) because of Annabel's infidelity.

As in the first act, the play suggests alternate values, the realist and the romantic, and parodies both. Comedy provides as a penultimate stage a period of "licence and the confusion of values"²³: here this comic motif is presented in the most extreme form possible, affecting not only the moral background but also character, and pointing forward to the coming festivity.

In this situation of radically different interpretations of the action, it seems that anything is possible. Woodruff momentarily supposes that Lessingham is stirring up dissension because of his illicit love for Annabel. The scene of festivity and reunion which has been set up becomes a battleground across which Bonvile and Lessingham, Clare and Annabel, Bonvile and Annabel, Bonvile and Woodruff, bicker noisily. We are forced to agree with Woodruff who sees the whole thing as an acted comedy, a "fine" scene with his daughter in the role of madwoman (V.1.286).

The play is returning, temporarily, to the ambiguous and riddling mode of the early scenes. Bonvile insists on the return of the will which the play has used, like the carcanet which becomes a fetter, as an image for the changing marriage relationship. Annabel pointedly urges him to give up his "Self-will" (V.1.285), a quibble which echoes the duel scene, where Bonvile interprets Clare's riddling message as an invitation to Lessingham to destroy his own "self-love" (111.1.88). Bonvile meets Annabel's pun with a quibble of his own, insisting that he bequeathed his property to her when he was supposed dead, but now that her love for him is so truly dead (V.1.298), he proposes to have it altered. The elaborate riddling mode of Clare and Lessingham has been resumed, and is again leading to misunderstandings which threaten to destroy relationships.

He is now using fiction recklessly, and obscenely accuses Annabel of using "another Key/Besides her husbands" (V.1.204-5) on that nuptial carcanet which is so sinisterly metamorphosing into a chain. Woodruff, who has an acute sense of the difference between fact and fiction, refuses to believe the story, and draws his sword on Lessingham in a comic version of the tragicomic duel on Calais sands. Lessingham, whose allegiance to Machiavelli is only skin deep, beats a hasty retreat.

Bonvile enters, entirely unaware of this latest complication, and apparently bringing the happy ending with him as he offers to reconcile Woodruff and Lessingham. He seems quite ready to forget the tragicomic disturbances and to return to the situation at the beginning of the play. Woodruff, in his own way a comic mouthpiece who predicts the entrance of Compass, determinedly tones down the tragicomic accusations and repeats them "in laughter" (V.1.235). Bonvile, however, is not so dedicated to comedy, and is still mistaking the relationship between words and things. In this scene where the characters are trying on extreme and shifting poses, and where the danger of tragedy is grotesquely overstated into parody, Bonvile rapidly becomes the jealous and murderous husband. Forgetting his mission as reconciler, he immediately threatens to kill Annabel if she has really given her jewels to Rochfield.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, though, Clare, who had previously been on the side of anarchy, now takes over the role of producer of the comic ending, accusing Bonvile of being deceived by fictions because of his own "jealousy" (V.1.259). Characters are changing confusingly, alternatively accepting and rejecting fictions, assuming conventional roles and suddenly inverting them.

This sense of danger, though, is undercut and is short-lived. The bickering on grounds which we as audience know are not valid, the rapid, balletic changing combinations in the quarrels, and the speed of the untidy entrances and exits, all give the scene a strong leaning towards comedy and parody. The whole scene revels in its own theatricality: it has become the equivalent of a play within the play, founded in fiction and metaphor, and which is to be cut across by the entrance of Compass and finally by the return of real life. The scene mediates for the audience between the play and the world by the increasingly theatrical definitions made of the play's fictional nature, and by the increasing separation between the situation as we know it to be and the kind of language in which it is described.

Strangely it is Clare who takes the first step towards general reconciliation by promising that she will "sowder ... together" (V.1.338) Annabel and Bonville, not shrinking from the accusation that it was she alone who caused "the division" between them (V.1.341). As Romelio the main agent of discord must take the first step toward the happy ending, so Clare, the most confused, passionate and "lost" of the play's people must become "the clew/To lead you forth this Labyrinth" (V.1.348-9). Clare, who had previously hidden behind riddles and paradoxes, now explains, clearly and directly, the complicated situation. The play's images of disorientation and the loss of direction are finally righted by Clare's "clew" and the "Compass" who provides the happy ending. Here Clare abandons her double role and her love of riddles and fiction, and Rochfield follows her lead and discards his fictional definitions of his own identity by admitting that Annabel gave her jewellery not to a lover but to a thief.

The play parodies its own theatrical nature and returns its audience from the metaphorical to the literal mode, from fiction to fact.

The more immediate danger and the more grotesque elements of comedy have already been toned down to fit into the characteristic Websterian tragicomic ending of "survival and not salvation"²⁴. However the more profound change is still to come. "Soft Music" (V.1.437 SD) is heard and Bonville immediately claims it as a celebration for the coming wedding of Clare and Lessingham. Immediately the people of the play fit, as if by magic, into the patterns of the happy ending under the influence of Compass's wedding music. Lessingham apologises to Bonville for his "wilde distractions" (V.1.441); assuring them that he has now controlled his "fury" (V.1.445). Clare admits that her "preevish will" (V.1.448) had been to blame and repents. She and Lessingham quietly accept each other, and Lessingham announces the rather subdued happy ending - "All's now as at first/It was wisht to be ..." (V.1.451-2). The Devil's Law-case ends with "success beyond our wishes" (V.v.102), a happy ending which had seemed impossible in the dark, dangerous world of the play. A Cure for a Cuckold, set in a more controllable world, achieves the happy ending it had set up and expected, a demonstration of the play's more solid comic basis. The expected love-relationships are finally completed, and the play returns in a circle of disguise, role-playing, and riddling language, to the situation and images of its own first act. We are disengaged from the fiction by its insistence that, however much its characters abandon metaphor and equivocation, what we have been watching is simply a theatrical fiction which finally accepts a conventional pattern and a fictional past.

However there is still to come the most obvious, and comforting, visual symbol of the happy ending as Compass enters with his remarried wife. Compass has represented the comic spirit throughout the play in his generous affection for his wife and her child: his refusal to accept the conventional theatrical evaluation of that most ignoble role of the complacent cuckold, has throughout the play rebuked the easy jealousy and over-stated theatricality of the tragicomic plot. Now that the top plot has crystallised as a consciously theatrical version of experience, the entrance of Compass reduces this plot to the status of a play within the play: his entrance provides the final double-vision, the final confrontation of the two halves of the play. Compass's wedding music marks the happy ending: his simple presence tones down images of danger and parody, as his simple use of language earlier in the play changes as if by magic the lawyers' view of the status of the child. Compass the comic spirit faces the tragicomic danger and disturbance of the main plot. One genre is allowed to comment on the other: one half of the tragicomic synthesis faces the other and reforms it in its own image. As we have come to expect in tragicomedy, the ending of the play sets up a perspective between fiction and the return to real life. The entrance of Compass shatters the self-conscious theatricality of the top plot, reducing it to the status of a play within the play, and pointing the audience forward to the return to real life.

For an instant the two groups of characters hold their positions as a tableau of the play within the play is interrupted by the entrance of its audience on stage. The two groups then merge as each comments on and accepts the other: the tragicomic synthesis is complete. Compass banishes the danger of the

tragicomic plot with its images of quarrel and death by his comic agreement with Woodruff's startled exclamation that his first wife is not yet buried - "No indeed, I mean to dig her grave soon. I had no leisure yet ..." (V.1.464-5). Frankford is introduced as "the Father to give the bride" (V.1.479): the baby is his "Grand-childe" (V.1.481), and yet simultaneously the reborn Compass's elder brother (V.1.483). The riddling mode is resumed, but it is no longer dangerous or threatening, but is simply a sign of the metaphorical nature of the play itself: it immediately gives way to the literal mode of logical discussion. A comic conversation discusses whether two marriages are firmer than one and whether "Two Affirmatives make no Negative" (V.1.494). Perhaps we are to take this as a comment on the play which attempts to circumvent the "negation" of the tragicomic ending by presenting us instead with the two "Affirmatives" of the rebirth and remarriage of Compass and the education and reconciliation of the young people.

Compass's wedding procession completes the happy ending. Although at first it seems to be a simplified version of the included masque, it expands in significance to cast doubt upon which of its two groups are actors and which audience. This rich confusion of reality and fiction leads towards their separation and the end of the play. At last Woodruff, like Ariosto in The Devil's Law-case, comments on the happy ending. The discords which have prepared for the establishment of concord continue to surround the happy ending, not now as a danger but as a haunting sense of incompleteness -

Our Wedding we have yet to solemnise,
The first is still imperfect. Such troubles
Have drowned our Musick: but I hope all's friends ... (V.1.517-519).

Compass speaks the final words of the play, cheerfully riding jokes

about cuckoos, and recommending to cuckold his own use of a dramatised stratagem for shedding horns. The broken celebration is resumed, and the play's cyclic form returns to its own beginning with images of marriage and music.

Conclusions

A Cure for a Cuckold develops through tragicomic discords as the two plots are juxtaposed and as the main plot in turn convinces us and parodies itself. Like The Devil's Law-case, it presents a world where riddles, metaphor and theatricality threaten its stability and security. Unlike The Devil's Law-case, though, it uses metaphor and theatricality directly to bring about the happy ending. Like A King and No King it shows both the basic danger and a defence from it arising from language and from a confusion between language and action. On the whole, though, because of its willingness to parody itself, especially towards the end of the play, and because of the prominence of the Compass plot, the play has a firmer comic control, and its final moments are less disturbing and less ambiguous than those of Webster's other tragicomedy. The ending of A Cure for a Cuckold frankly admits its own status as fiction by presenting Compass's wedding with its obvious acting out of fictional and metaphorical roles and having this collide with the passionate quarrelling of the young people, which has become increasingly swamped in theatricality and theatrical parody. As the young people change partners and bicker, they stage a number of tiny scenes for which the more moderate members of the community, Rochfield or Woodruff, serve as audience: and we as audience in the theatre are reminded of our

role as observers and are prepared for the ending of this role. By juxtaposing these two strands which each use fiction and metaphor, but in a different way, Webster casts doubt upon which represents the real and which the fictional world, and leaves us to disentangle them as the play itself is replaced by real life. A Cure for a Cuckold is one of the most comic of tragicomedies, since it moves through a period of confusion of values to resume the disrupted festivity, gives the guiding role to Compass, ends with "two Affirmatives" of a new happiness which is as "at first it was wisht to be", and interprets the tragicomic plot increasingly in terms of parody. The ending mediates for the audience between the play and the world by its presentation of the audience, by its definition of metaphor and theatricality as entertaining as well as threatening, and by its final blurring of the play within the play and its return to real life. Like The Devil's Law-case it is interested in the ambiguous power of metaphor and theatricality but it accepts it much more whole-heartedly and is less aware of a disturbing tension between its two aspects. The play, and Webster's career in tragicomedy, ends in a "negation" of the tragicomic plot through parody and a blatant admission of its theatricality, but also in "two Affirmatives", as comedy and tragicomedy finally synthesise in images of marriage, music, and metaphor precariously become benevolent.

NOTES

1. I have not attempted to assign parts of the play to individual authors: for that see H.D. Sykes, "Webster's Share in A Cure" (N&Q 9 1914) pp. 382-384, 404-5, 443-445, 463-464, H.D. Gray, "A Cure by Heywood, Rowley and Webster" (MLR 22 1927) pp.389-397, F.L. Lucas, The Complete Works of John Webster, vol 111, pp. 10-18 (1927), Dewar M. Robb, "The Canon of William Rowley's Plays" (MLR 45 1950) pp. 129-141, P.B. Murray, A Study of John Webster (The Hague 1969). Critical argument is inconclusive, contradictory, and sometimes inaccurate, especially in the question of Heywood's authorship. It is quite likely that Rowley was largely responsible for the Compass plot, which uses typical characters, jokes, and tricks of rhythm: and it seems indisputable that Webster's hand is discernible at least in parts of the tragicomic plot (See Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "Webster's Constructional Rhythm", ELH 24, 1957, pp.165-176). However the articulation of the plots suggests that the play is, like The Changeling, an "intimate collaboration" (Lucas vol 111, p.18) and that it is valid to talk of Webster's hand in the whole play, and not only in a few scenes in the tragicomic plot.
2. Cf. Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" (English Institute Essays 1948), p.67- "That profounder pattern. The ritual of death and revival ..."
3. See Appendix.
4. See Appendix. Gray, op. cit., p.390, uses the word as evidence of Heywood's authorship since according to him Webster elsewhere always uses "merry". He is wrong however: Webster uses

"pleasant" in this sense at The Devil's Law-case 111.iii.49

- "I am glad you grow thus pleasant ..."

5. Only at 11.iii.89, 112-113 and 1V.1.82.
6. E.g. 1.1.105, 1.2.36, 11.3.112, 11.4.99, 179.
7. E.g. 111.1.85, 1V.2.152.
8. P.B. Murray, op. cit., p.216.
9. P.B. Murray, op. cit., pp. 217, 222-228.
10. Compass's name puns on the piece of nautical equipment, an appropriate name for a sailor, and also on his ability to keep his emotions within "compass". There may also be an allusion to the Elizabethan meaning, cited in the SOED, of "artifice, ingenuity; craft, cunning", which would be appropriate for the man who devises a way to cure his own cuckoldry. This multiplicity of double meanings is characteristic of the way in which the play uses language.
11. This is not necessarily to postulate Heywood's authorship. Several points in the play indeed seem to have a parodic relationship to the plays of Heywood. The cuckold-maker in Webster's play, for instance, bears the name, Frankford, of the virtuous and long-suffering husband in A Woman Killed with Kindness. It is surely significant that critics have found most evidence for Heywood's authorship of A Cure in plays on which he collaborated with Rowley, like Fortune by Land and Sea. It seems to me that evidence for Heywood's authorship is extremely slight, but it is by no means impossible that Rowley is giving a gentle and affectionate parody of some of the themes, characters and preoccupations of the plays of one of his most constant collaborators.

12. And this imagery is found elsewhere in the play - Rochfield redeems his reputation in a sea-fight, and in a moving and revealing image Clare compares her feelings to those of a merchant who sees his ship sink at the entrance of the harbour (1V.2.59-62).
13. Cf. The Parliament of Love, The Dutch Courtesan, The Two Noble Kinsmen, The Faithful Friends, etc.
14. Ian Fletcher, Beaumont and Fletcher (1967) p.8.
15. Cf. The Changeling, where Beatrice-Joanna believes that the word "whore" "blasts [her] beauty to deformity" (V.iii.32). And in Rowley's other play A Fair Quarrel the duel turns on the Colonel's verbal accusation that Captain Ager is "the son of a whore" (1.i.346).
16. It is difficult to know what "unwittingly" might mean, if it is not simply a sign of Clare's incoherence and confusion about her own motives. If she intended to trick him into poisoning or stabbing her, as Olympia does in 11 Tamburlaine, she goes about it in a very strange way.
17. A play which also turns on deciding whether the Colonel's insult, "son of a whore" (1.i.346), has a literal or metaphorical application.
18. Gosse produced this play in 1884, edited by S.E. Spring-Rice.
19. Una Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (1936) p.183.
20. Cf Othello 1.iii.401, 11.i.127-8 - "My Muse labours ..."
21. Cf. Dr. Faustus 1.v.42 - "Solamen miseris, socios habuisse doloris".
22. The White Devil V.vi.299.
23. Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" (English Institute Essays 1948), p.67.

24. Gunnar Bosklund, "The Devil's Law-case: an End or a Beginning?"
(John Webster, Mermaid Critical Commentaries, Morris ed,
1970) p.126.

CONCLUSION

"The Most Cunning and Curious Musick...Out of Discords": Conclusion

In his treatise De Sculptura the Renaissance scholar Pomponius Gauricus described three kinds of action which it was possible to depict in sculpture. The third is the "ambiguous", in which it is impossible to be sure of the direction of the movement depicted¹. It is tempting to relate this "ambiguous" kind of action to Jacobean dramatic tragicomedy. At the ending of the play, we do not know in which direction the action is to go: it is poised in an ambiguous moment which can point either forward or backward, to a happy ending which may be completely secure or ironically qualified or so overstated as to suggest parody. At the end of Measure for Measure the director can show Isabella accepting or rejecting the Duke's offer of marriage and the happy ending. The conclusion of the play is sufficiently ambiguous, and even the Janus-faced adverb "behind" (V.i.536) can indicate either progress or retreat into the past.

Tragicomedy with its hair's-breadth escapes from death, its discontinuous characters, its balance of the heroic and the trivial, and its enormous emotional range encompassing fear and relief, joy and discomfort, sympathy and detachment was extremely popular in its own day. Indeed the movement toward mixed genres seems an essential part of the development of Jacobean drama. J.R. Mulryne has pointed out how certain tragedies of the period, King Lear, The Changeling, The Revenger's Tragedy, all "approximate

... tragicomic experience"². Even the comedy of the period was searching for a way of integrating experience which threatens the comic stability. Love's Labours Lost, Volpone, A Trick to Catch the Old One, and A New Way to Pay Old Debts use the comic structure to include pain, betrayal, disillusion, madness, despair and death. Jacobean tragicomedies were simply an attempt to make explicit an important tendency implicit in much of the drama of the period.

With modern critics Jacobean tragicomedies have had "an attenuated, as much as a bad, press"³ largely because critics have not cared to look beyond the gratification of fantasy which tragicomedies are said to provide. The genre is held to be the final proof of the "decadence"⁴ of the late Jacobean stage: Rupert Brooke describes Fletcher flooding the more rigorous forms of tragedy and comedy in "a sea of saccharine"⁵. I have tried to demonstrate, though, that far from inviting us to sail off into a saccharine sea, tragicomedies disturb us with ambiguities. They explore the confrontation of tragedy and comedy, and express themselves in clashing tones, discords, ironic repetition and ironic juxtaposition. Successful tragicomedies do not shy away from tragedy because of the "weakness"⁶ of the audience or the author's neurotic need for a happy ending. They criticise tragedy, analyse and invert the tragic structures, and place tragedy in the wider context of "the Whole Truth"⁷.

Tragicomedies do more than releasing and enacting our fantasies. They also disturb us by insisting on the precariousness of their own conventions and especially of their rhetoric. Many plays show characters failing to understand the metaphors of others, and depict verbal ambiguities and colliding meanings, and a collapsing

rhetoric which falsifies rather than expressing truth. One of the most common motifs in baroque funerary sculpture is the figure of Time, a grinning skeleton carrying a destructive scythe. The conventional nature of the metaphor, though, often blunts its power to disturb, to remind us of the facts of mortality. In the Capuchin cemetery in the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Rome, however, the motif recurs, and the artist has used a real skeleton, whose scythe and scales are also made out of human bones. We expect a metaphor and find ourselves confronting literal truth: the effect is uncomfortable and disorientating in the same way as tragicomedy's insistent questioning of its own conventions and its own rhetoric.

Tragicomedy was so popular in its own day not only because it tells good stories well, includes the widest possible spectrum of feeling, and presents its extreme antitheses clearly and sharply. It was also popular because it established a special relationship with its audience, made it a dramatic character, and presented it with its own faculty as observers of an enacted fiction. Many plays use induction, the play within the play or its equivalent, generic description, and images of play, actor and audience. Oscar Wilde, characteristically expressing the two halves of a truth as antithetical rather than complementary, insisted that "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors"⁸, in a novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, that shows art mirroring the spectator in a peculiarly literal sense. Critics have recently lost touch with tragicomedy because they have failed to investigate the way in which the genre mirrors the spectator. Intimately connected with this is the lack of interest of the modern theatre in Jacobean tragicomedy: apart from the

welcome return of Measure for Measure to the repertoire, and the occasional revival of The Malcontent or The Knight of The Burning Pestle, almost no Renaissance tragicomedy is revived. This is a pity since, as I have demonstrated, tragicomedy depends so much on "action" and images of action and theatricality. The script is as inadequate a summary of the whole experience of tragicomedy as it is for masque or farce.

The self-conscious interest of tragicomedy in its own theatricality is especially significant at the ending of the play, as fiction gives place to fact, and the playwright must help the audience to readjust between the primary and the secondary worlds. At the end of Love's Labours Lost, Armado comments on the unbridgeable gap between fiction and real life at the end of the play - "You that way: we this way" (V.ii.923). In the epilogue to All's Well That Ends Well the King of France shrinks from a king to an actor to an observer ready to applaud the acting of the audience as they return to their real lives. Finally as the "show"⁹ of Summer's Last Will and Testament comes to an end, Will Somers comments on the separateness of actors and audience by telling us, in Latin to prove his point, that with the ending of the play we can no longer understand him or the language of fiction¹⁰. These endings mediate for the audience between the fiction and real life, reminding us that what we have been watching is a theatrical fiction, and commenting on the differences between play and real life. Tragicomedy, itself a tissue of double images and double meanings, uses especially significantly this final double vision as the play ends, leaving not a rack behind. The tragicomic ending, to use George Eliot's terminology, presents a "negation"¹¹, but it is a negation which tells us about the

shifting world of the play, and about the relation between its fictional world and real life.

M.T. Herrick has suggested that of all the great Jacobean playwrights, Webster was the least interested in tragicomedy¹². This seems to me quite wrong. Not only are his two tragicomedies among the most interesting that his age produced, but his tragedies too adapt many of the conventions and interests of tragicomedy. Both, for instance, use extensively and significantly the language of comedy. Both make much use of ironic repetition and juxtaposition, of images of audience and play, and of verbal ambiguities and colliding interpretations, as well as introducing overtly comic or tragicomic incidents and anecdotes. In both plays, tragedy is placed in the context of "the Whole Truth", the small-scale, inconsistent, unheroic world in which we actually live. The White Devil poses tragedy as a climax, a precarious moment of affirmation and understanding won from satire at enormous cost. The Duchess of Malfi pushes this precarious tragic moment forward into its fourth act and shows it dissipated into a number of tiny comedies, tragicomedies, and parodies of tragedy in the negative, trivial, self-doubting world which the Duchess leaves behind her.

In The Devil's Law-case and A Cure for a Cuckold Webster consciously uses tragicomedy as a medium to describe this shifting world of precarious values and precarious affirmations. A Cure for a Cuckold is a lively, vivid, compassionate play which analyses its theatrical and verbal nature and which parodies the conventions of tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy. It reaches a secure and moving happy ending through boisterous comedy, unexpected suggestions of romance, and brief but powerful presentations of

passion, disorientation, and despair. The Devil's Law-case is a more challenging play, testing both aspects of its nature as a visual and verbal construct, and expressing a dangerous world very like that of the tragedies through inverted conventions and verbal ambiguities. Its ending, where Webster moves from a verbal mode to expression through "action" seems frankly experimental, a convincing evocation of a world of ruined languages where elaborate visual forms are tried out as a way of expressing complicated emotions. Both plays seem particularly interested in their audience, and in guiding us through their tissue of colliding definitions by their complex exploration of their theatrical nature.

Thomas Heywood, himself an innovator with tragicomic forms, seems to have been interested in the whole concept of mixed genres. Many plays, A Woman Killed with Kindness or The Rape of Lucrece, contrast tragedy with other kinds of experience or even use these other kinds of experience to undermine tragedy altogether. He was not only interested in this mixture in a dramatic context, though. In his prose work Gunaikaion, in which he collects lives of famous women, he describes the technique of his historical writings. He has, he tells us, intermixed the bare facts of history with "fabulous Jeasts and Tales"¹³. He has done this in a deliberate attempt to enrich his historical works, for

The most cunning and curious Musick is that which is
made out of Discords.

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It would be hard to find a better description of Jacobean dramatic tragicomedy.

NOTES

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3. Ralph Berry, The Art of John Webster (1972), p.151.
4. T.B. Tomlinson, A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy (1964), p.215.
5. Rupert Brooke, John Webster and Elizabethan Drama (1916), p.75.
6. As Aristotle suggests in Poetics xiii 11-13 (W. Hamilton Fyfe, Loeb ed., 1927, p.49).
7. Aldous Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth" (Music at Night 1931), p.18.
8. Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray (Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, ed. J.B. Foreman, 1948), p.17.
9. The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works, ed. J.B. Steane (1972), p.148.
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11. Cited by Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending (1966), p.174.
12. M.T. Herrick, Tragicomedy (Urbana 1962), p.280.
13. Thomas Heywood Gunaikeion: or Nine Books of Various History Concerning Women ... (1624). Epistle "To The Reader" A4-v.
14. Thomas Heywood, op. cit.

ABBREVIATIONS

<u>ELH</u>	<u>English Literary History.</u>
<u>ELR</u>	<u>English Literary Renaissance.</u>
<u>ES</u>	<u>English Studies.</u>
<u>E & S</u>	<u>Essays and Studies.</u>
<u>JEGP</u>	<u>Journal of English and Germanic Philology.</u>
<u>JGP</u>	<u>Journal of Germanic Philology.</u>
<u>MLQ</u>	<u>Modern Language Quarterly.</u>
<u>MLR</u>	<u>Modern Language Review.</u>
<u>MP</u>	<u>Modern Philology.</u>
<u>N & Q</u>	<u>Notes and Queries.</u>
<u>PMLA</u>	<u>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.</u>
<u>PQ</u>	<u>Philological Quarterly.</u>
<u>RES</u>	<u>Review of English Studies.</u>
<u>SEL</u>	<u>Studies in English Literature.</u>
<u>SP</u>	<u>Studies in Philology.</u>
<u>Cure</u>	<u>A Cure for a Cuckold.</u>
<u>DLC</u>	<u>The Devil's Law-case.</u>
<u>Malfi</u>	<u>The Duchess of Malfi.</u>
<u>WD</u>	<u>The White Devil.</u>
<u>AYLI</u>	<u>As You Like It.</u>
<u>LLL</u>	<u>Love's Labour's Lost.</u>
<u>M for M</u>	<u>Measure for Measure.</u>
<u>Temp</u>	<u>The Tempest.</u>
<u>K and No</u>	
<u>K</u>	<u>A King and No King.</u>
<u>A and M</u>	<u>Antonio and Mellida.</u>
<u>A's R</u>	<u>Antonio's Revenge.</u>
<u>Malc</u>	<u>The Malcontent.</u>
<u>SOED</u>	<u>Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.</u>

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APPENDIXThe Vocabulary of Comedy in The Plays of John WebsterThe White Devil

- 1.i.3 Lodovico laughs.
- 1.i.20-4 "Those noblemen ... /Laugh at your misery."
- 1.i.26 "jest upon you..."
- 1.ii.71 "under what a smiling planet..."
- 1.ii.193 "the jest of the silkworm ..."
- 1.ii.196 Flamineo laughs.
- 11.i.168 "I should be merry..."
- 11.i.274-6 "To see her come/To my lord Cardinal for a dispensation/
Of her rash vow, will beget excellent laughter."
- 11.i.306 "Your secretary is merry..."
- 11.i.372-3 "Your parting is so merry.../Merry my lord, a'th'
captain's humour..."
- 11.ii.23SD Isabella's murderers "depart laughing".
- 111.i.30-1 "I do put on this feigned garb of mirth/To gull suspicion".
- 111.ii.207 "... a merry heart..."
- 111.ii.324 "hear music, go a-hunting, and be merry ..."
- 111.iii.84 "grieve is used ironically for "laugh".
- 111.iii.85 "What a strange creature is a lughing fool ..."
Gasparo and Antonelli are laughing.
- 111.iii.90 "Precious girn, rogue".
- 111.iii.102 "Why do you laugh?"
- 111.iii.106 "...if you will be merry..."
- 111.iii.112 "I spake that laughing".
- 111.iii.118 Lodovico laughs.

- 111.iii.122 "This laughter scurvily becomes your face".
- 111.iii.124 "now I laugh too".
- 1V.i.119 "My tragedy must have some idle mirth in't".
- 1V.ii.207 Florence's letter written out of "love or gullery..."
- 1V.ii.243 "It may appear to some ridiculous..."
- 1V.iii.146 "the least wanton jests".
- V.i.100 "a ridiculous thing..."
- V.ii.9 "Publish not a fear/which would convert to laughter."
- V.iii.99 Brachiano laughs.
- V.iii.118 Brachiano laughs.
- V.iii.196 "makes you die laughing".
- V.iii.237 "Thou didst laugh.../Laugh?"
- V.iii.240 "She simpers..."
- V.iv.12 "Your grace must be merry..."
- V.iv.46 "You are merry.../Thou art sad."
- V.iv.120 "when my face was full of smiles..."
- V.v.2 "ridiculously."
- V.vi.107 "thy ridiculous purgatory..."
- V.vi.194 "Dost laugh?"
- V.vi.251 "But seas do laugh..."

The Duchess of Malfi

- 1.i.107 "of a jest she broke..."
- 1.i.121 Roderigo and Grisolan laugh.
- 1.i.122 "Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers should ... laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty."

- 1.i.126 "I myself have heard a very good jest..."
- 1.i.129 "But I can laugh at your fool..."
- 1.i.133 "Nor endure to be in merry company ... too much laughing ... fills her too full of the wrinkle."
- 1.i.137 "that she might not laugh out of compass..."
- 1.i.170 "What appears in him mirth, is merely outside;/If he laugh heartily, it is to laugh/All honesty out of fashion."
- 1.i.378 "Were not one better make it smiling, thus..."
- 11.i.9-10 "If you smile upon a prisoner..."
- 11.i.12 "a very merry president..."
- 11.i.140 "O you jest..."
- 11.ii.40 Bosola laughs.
- 11.iii.70 "which I'll endure and laugh at..."
- 11.iv.56 "Your laughter/Is my pity."
- 11.v.38 "Methinks I see her laughing..."
- 111.i.53 "When were we so merry?"
- 111.ii.317 "this jesting with religion..."
- 111.iii.54-5 "The Lord Ferdinand laughs/Like a deadly cannon..."
- 1V.ii.41 "...Being full of change and sport, forc'd him to laugh..."
- 1V.ii.151 "Let me be a little merry..."
- V.ii.238 "I cannot love your grace when you are sad/As well as merry..."
- V.v.25 "It will not serve to laugh me out of mine honour..."
- V.v.30 "The accent of the voice sounds not in jest..."
- V.v.33 "And note how the Cardinal will laugh at him..."

The Devil's Law-case

- 1.i.109 "fired with scorn and laughter..."
- 1.i.149 "to feign smiles..."
- 1.ii.52 "that I must become ridiculous..."
- 1.ii.139 "we are merry..."
- 1.ii.154 "smile me a thank..."
- 1.ii.185 "I do but jest..."
- 11.i.44 "I am merry..."
- 11.i.111 "to the making men merry..."
- 11.iii.23 "You are merry..."
- 11.iii.106 "Make the heralds laugh..."
- 111.ii.44 "To jest and be merry with you..."
- 111.iii.42 "I am glad you grow thus pleasant..."
- 111.iii.157 "make you smile to think..."
- 111.iii.221 "It makes me smile to think..."
- 111.iii.251 "Last merriment 'fore winter."
- 1V.i.13 "Joy come to you, you are merry..."
- 1V.ii.221 "Thus would they jest..."
- 1V.ii.380 "I have heard them laugh together..."
- V.i.14 Jolenta laughs.
- V.i.21 "pray thee laugh".
- V.ii.5 "and laugh at them..."
- V.iii.29 "the comical event..."
- V.iv.63 "were I in your case, I should laugh..."
- V.v.62 "these so comical events..."

A Cure for a Cuckold

- 1.i.5 "A day of mirth..."
- 1.i.6 "For such as can be merry..."
- 1.i.24 "this Jovial meeting..."
- 1.i.105 "You are pleasant..."
- 1.i.32 "You that were won't to be compos'd of mirth..."
- 1.ii.36 "Prithee be merry..."
- 1.ii.41 "... pleasant..."
- 11.iii.89 "Children cry before they laugh..."
- 11.iii.112 "I'm glad y'are merry..."
- 11.iii.113 "Merry? nay, Ile be merrier yet..."
- 11.iv.99 "You may be merry..."
- 11.iv.179 "Pray you be merry..."
- 11.iv.187 "Ile be merry now spite of the Hang-man..."
- 111.i.72 "Away, you jest..."
- 111.i.85 "She mocks you..."
- 1V.i.82 "And how you will laugh at your clients..."
- 1V.ii.47 "A sweeter touch of Mirth..."
- 1V.ii.68 "... smiling, and not blushing..."
- 1V.ii.152 "You mock me..."
- V.i.235 "I will tell it in laughter..."
- V.i.236 "... ridiculous..."
- V.i.237 Woodruff laughs.