

"The Duchess of Malfi"

By KENNETH REXROTH

THE DRAMA of Shakespeare is distinguished, even in the plays where he is still learning his craft, by an extraordinary coherence of all the artistic processes, of creation, of structure of the work itself, of response in audience or reader. Subjective-objective, classical-romantic, expressionistic-architectural, realism-symbolism—such antitheses are subsumed in a synthesis of completely integrated communication. It is this massive integrity which has led innumerable critics to postulate a man, Shakespeare, who is far better organized than most humans, let alone most writers or people of the theater. Even the plays that seem to reflect a period of personal tragedy and disillusion, such as *Hamlet* or *Troilus and Cressida*, show few signs of any fragmentation of personality in their author—whatever may be the case with their heroes and heroines.

Few contemporary artists in any medium could be found to show forth better the schism in the most fundamental nature—the very sources—of creativity, which has become so characteristic of all the arts since the early years of the nineteenth century, than Ben Jonson and John Webster, writing three centuries ago. The difference is so great that we seem to be dealing with two distinct operations of the mind. The plays of Jonson are classic in structure and objective in their delineation of motives and behavior, but also they are conceived of as taking place "out there." The esthetic process, from creator to spectator, occurs in material which is independent of either of them once it has been formed.

Webster is not the least interested in what happens "out there." He uses poetry, drama, acting, stage effects solely to work inside the spectator. The material of Webster is the collective nervous system of his audience. This is beyond romanticism and its subjectivity. Nothing would appear quite like it until, following Poe, Mallarmé 300 years later would make the method explicit. Yet how explicit? We have no name for it, and that in a field ever fertile with jargon—criticism and esthetics. And few critics watching *The Duchess of Malfi* or reading *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* are aware of what is happening to them.

The Duchess of Malfi is a fashionable play, a revival of the tragedy of blood so popular at the beginning of Elizabethan drama. So are *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

Webster is a conscious, deliberate disciple of Shakespeare. So are Beaumont and Fletcher. It is one of the first tragedies that can be called decadent, both in its verse structure and in its somewhat phosphorescent dramaturgy—the greatest of a class that includes Tourneur, Ford, and Shirley and would be imitated, carefully but with only limited success, by Shelley in *The Cenci*. Yet it really isn't like any of these plays.

In the very first scene of *Duchess*, Webster, wasting no time, starts out to do something quite different from Shakespeare in *Macbeth* or Shelley in *The Cenci*. Shakespeare is building a character, setting a scene, creating a psychological environment that will define the character and the tragedy of Macbeth himself—out there. Shelley does that, too, but he is more interested in himself, in expressing himself, perhaps in scaring himself a little. We call it romantic subjectivism.

In the opening scene of *Duchess*, Antonio and Delio carry on a dialogue which seems objective enough. They describe, as they appear, all the important characters, their interrelations, and hint at the potentialities for tragedy these relationships embody. But in what an extraordinary fashion! Webster uses a standard device, the opening dialogue, "Hello, old friend, what's been going on while I've been gone?" to string together a series of carefully concealed assaults on the nerves of his audience:

If it chance some cursed example
poison it near the head, death and
diseases through the whole land
spread. . . .

I do haunt you still. . . .

They are like plum trees that grow
crooked over standing pools. They are
rich and over laden with fruit but none
but crows, pies and caterpillars feed on
them. . . .

Places in court are like beds in hos-
pital, where this man's head lies at that
man's foot, and so lower and lower.

Corruption—the idea echoes with the word throughout the first act in what purports to be the ordinary conversation of a court. It is a court where the head sickens and the members rot, but over and above the careful setting of a situa-

tion, Webster is striving to affect the audience directly. This play is going to take place inside the heads—in each individual brain—of the audience.

Is this melodrama? The play is certainly a melodrama by conventional definition, but this is more like hypnosis. As the play goes on, horror seeps into the most commonplace statements until language loses its informative role and becomes a kind of argot whose aim always is not communication between the characters but manipulation of the minds of the audience. Meanwhile, the action goes on, bodies move in space with uncanny haste and glow with fox-fire. The stage is lit with decay.

Melodrama is supposed to be bad art. Is *The Duchess of Malfi* great art? It certainly is great melodrama, probably the greatest ever written, and in addition—and more importantly—it adds an entirely new dimension to drama, or even to art as a whole. If great art makes us confront the profoundest meanings of life, *Duchess* is hardly art at all, because it literally doesn't mean much. When we leave the play our nerves have been rubbed raw and tortured. Does this make them more acute receptors? It may just as well dull our sensitivity as sharpen it. We are left nervously exhausted by a novel such as *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, but we are also left prostrate by a long look into the abyss of deliberate evil, and our valuations of human conduct and our responses to those valuations have been subtly reorganized. The good and evil that struggle in *The Duchess of Malfi*, once the play is over, vanish. The Duchess changes her costume and is just an actress, impatient to be gone to a late supper.

In recent years the estheticians and critics who try to establish a moral ground of justification for the arts have shifted their position to a kind of physiological esthetic: "The arts work upon us through abstract, purely artistic qualities. They do not teach or even communicate. The experience of the subtle architectonics of a great work of art makes us more refined, more efficient organisms, and the cumulative effects of such experiences through life make us better men." There is not an iota of empirical evidence for this notion. On the contrary, society has always been suspicious of "esthetes" as secret rascals given to shocking depravities. This is not true, either; Oscar Wilde's Dorian Grey and the heroes of Huysmans's novels are excessively rare types. Although it follows the conventions of tragedy and deals, with great psychological penetration, with the slow corruption of consciously chosen evil, *The Duchess of Malfi* is not a nerve tonic or a moral stimulant. It is simply very great entertainment and its own excuse for being.



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Subversion by Government

THE CIA was conceived twenty years ago as a specific response to the global subversive activities of communism. It was decided, on the highest levels of government, that what the U.S. needed was a super-secret agency with worldwide capabilities—an agency far more secret than even the FBI.

The CIA was specifically exempted at the start from most of the checks and balances that are indigenous to American Constitutional government. The funds at its disposal might run into billions of dollars, but there was no requirement for open public or legislative debate or review. The agency would be responsible to the President and would operate through a watchdog committee in Congress but even this procedure was at variance with the Constitutional requirements.

The work of the CIA was divided into two broad areas. One area involved the operation of a top-level information-gathering service that would make its reports available to the security centers of government, such as the White House, Department of Defense, Department of State. The second area was an operational branch that would carry out top-secret activities designed to advance the national interests of the United States.

It is now essential, on the basis of available but limited information, to attempt an assessment.

The analyses and reports compiled by the information or intelligence arm of the CIA, according to many competent observers inside and outside government, have been of the highest order.

It is over the action area, however, that the difficulties and the debates have arisen. The most recent disclosures about the CIA concern secret government funds being channeled into universities, labor unions, and organizations of students, newsmen, and businessmen. CIA officials privately would probably point to such activities as being among their finest achievements. For these were no cloak-and-dagger operations involving thefts of secret documents or underground acts of daring and violence. These activities have been part of an effort to mount an intellectual and cultural counter-offensive against the threat of communist ideology. The CIA was shrewd enough to know that the most effective forces it could recruit and send into the field would come not from the far right but from the center and the non-communist left. In the case of the international meetings of students, newsmen, and labor leaders, the main purpose of the CIA was not to use Americans as agents but to give the United States top-level representation at world intellectual or economic meetings involving opportunities for leadership.

Defenders of these CIA activities say that the nation has been well served by what they describe as a highly sophisticated and knowledgeable counter-offensive against the enemies of cultural and political freedom. It is also said that the CIA, both in Washington and in the field, has maintained the highest standards in the recruiting of its personnel.

But all this is beside the main point. For what is intended as a defense of the CIA actually constitutes its severest

indictment. It has now been demonstrated that even the most well-intentioned purposes and projects, when conceived and carried out within the context of undercover operations, carry penalties that far outweigh any good that might be achieved. The abuses of the CIA are not chargeable to poor judgment of its officials. The abuses are inherent in the terrible misconception behind the existence of the CIA.

The secret underwriting by the CIA of activities by the National Student Association is a case in point. Some student leaders who cooperated with the CIA were exempted from the draft. All were required to lie and to sign oaths saying they would not reveal the true state of affairs.

Half the nation's population is under the age of twenty-five. It is always risky to characterize the dominant mood of any generation, but there are many indications that many of the young people of this country today are losing confidence in the ability of their elders to operate a civilization responsibly or to demonstrate the kind of integrity that can provide a moral tone for the society. The discovery that the government itself has played a corrupting role is not likely to have a cleansing effect on the attitudes of the young people toward adult-approved institutions.

THE misconception behind the existence of the CIA is a simple one. That misconception is that it is possible and proper to turn over to a group of men the kind of authority and power that the U.S. Constitution was specifically designed to prevent. In fact, the very existence of the CIA is a monument to the failure of the recent and present generation of policymakers in government to take the basic philosophy of this nation seriously. The main point or principle that emerged from the work of the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention was that the biggest danger to human freedom was represented not just by bad men at the heads of bad governments but by good men who were put in positions where they were able to operate outside the law. The Founding Fathers didn't have to be told that extraordinary situations would arise in which extraordinary authority might be required. What concerned them, however, was that the existence of such situations might stampede and mislead men into creating a mechanism that in itself would be subversive of Constitutional government.

While the full story of the CIA in practice, as apart from theory, is known only to a few, enough is now known to underscore the foresight of the American Founders. Consider Cuba. When President John F. Kennedy came to office, he was confronted by a fully developed plan