

The Wax Figures in *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Probably few critics or viewers of *The Duchess of Malfi* would now agree with Ekeblad's judgment that "Webster's wax figures seem to have no other function than Madame Tussaud's."¹ Clearly the artificial figures of Antonio and the children represented in IV.i are not superfluous or, worse, pointless. Ralph Berry suggests that we have to penetrate "the Tussaud barrier" in order to see "that a waxwork body is merely a *simulacrum* of death and violence. . . ."² Indeed these figures help raise exponentially the sense of grotesque and horror as the Duchess faces her final hour. In the play's geometrical progression of torture the wax characters are central and crucial since they strike at the heart of the Duchess' reason for living, namely, her love for Antonio and the children; and they throw into high relief the sense of inevitability of the Duchess' fate even as they seem to prophesy the actual deaths of the children first and then Antonio. Responding to these wax figures, I will review possible sources for them, comment on their nature, and explore the pattern of allusions to funeral monuments.

Beyond Webster's own fertile imagination, sources or analogues that might have influenced the dramatic representation of the artificial figures range over literary, dramatic, and historical traditions. Editors of *The Duchess* and searchers after its sources virtually all agree on the possible influence of an episode from Sidney's *Arcadia*. As Boklund points out: "The introduction of the wax figures . . . has . . . a well-known Arcadian parallel in the mock executions of Pamela and Philoclea. In both works devices are used to make an imprisoned lady believe in the death of someone who is actually still alive. . . ."³ Other references in the play suggest a convincing awareness of the *Arcadia*.

A dramatic source that may impinge on *The Duchess* is *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*. Mario Praz, acting on a suggestion by John

¹Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster," *RES*, NS 9 (1958), 254.

²*The Art of John Webster* (Oxford, 1972), p. 21.

³Gunnar Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), p. 45.

Russell Brown, was, I believe, the first in print to call attention to this anonymous tragedy. Praz writes: "The episode in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* of the corpse dressed as by a modern mortician, which owes much to the episode of Hermione's statue in *The Winter's Tale*, may have combined with this latter and with the reminiscence of the mock corpses in *Arcadia* III to suggest the wax figures in *The Duchess of Malfi* (IV,i)."⁴ Brown says that *Second Maiden's Tragedy* was "performed by the King's Men in 1611" (p. xxxv),⁵ but the only evidence we have is that it was licensed for the stage by George Buc on October 31, 1611, subject to certain revisions.⁶ Certainly one might quibble with Praz regarding the indebtedness of this play to *The Winter's Tale*, but there are some curious goings-on in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* that could have influenced Webster.

The Tyrant in IV.iii goes to the tomb of the Lady, whom he has lustfully desired and who, partly as a result of that, has killed herself. With the help of soldiers the Tyrant robs the tomb of her body—obviously in staging this some sort of life-like effigy would be used, for at one point (V.ii) both the corpse and the ghost of the Lady are on the stage at the same time. The Tyrant proposes to "vnlock the treasure howse of arte" (l. 1862) in order to make this body seem alive; he would mask the reality with art. The stage direction in V.ii, describes her presentation: "*They bringe the Body in a Chaire drest vp in black veluet which settis out the pailenes of the handes and face, And a faire Chayne of pearle crosse her brest and the Crucyfixe above it . . .*" (2225-2227). Obeisance is done to the corpse. But the Tyrant's undoing comes when he hires Govianus, the true lover of the Lady, as a painter to make the body seem more real. Govianus, in disguise, obliges with poisonous paint that is fatal to the Tyrant. Certainly the sense of the grotesque and macabre is akin to Webster, though the Tyrant is busily deceiving himself rather than others.

One possible influence on Webster that has been largely undeveloped is Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, performed, to cite two certain occasions, in 1611 and at court in early 1613, about the time Webster may have been finishing *The Duchess*. Hermione's statue is a type of funeral effigy, or so everyone believes when it is

⁴"John Webster and *The Maid's Tragedy*," *English Studies*, 37 (1956), 258.

⁵All quotations are from the Revels edition, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).

⁶*The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, ed. W. W. Greg (Oxford, 1909), p. v. All citations will be from this edition.

displayed in V.iii. Leontes and the others who gaze on this figure assume that this is the life-like representation of Hermione, dead for some sixteen years, and Shakespeare through Paulina is careful to convey an appropriate sense of verisimilitude. Paulina pulls the curtain in order to reveal Hermione just as Bosola "discovers" the figures behind a "traverse." The Duchess believes, in contrast to Leontes, that what she sees are dead persons. Not only is Hermione alive, but this is no statue, as we discover. The transformation of Hermione leads to transcendent joy and reconciliation, while the wax figures belie the truth to the Duchess and encourage her longing for death. The world of *The Duchess* closes in and narrows to a tragic conclusion, while the world of *The Winter's Tale* enlarges unexpectedly into the rarest of comic possibilities. Just as Shakespeare points out that the statue has been newly performed by the rare Italian master, Julio Romano (V.ii.93-108), so Webster here credits the "curious master" Vincentio Lauriola with the construction of these wax figures. Unlike Romano, Lauriola's identity remains a mystery and elusive to all researchers.⁷

Quite possibly the historical event that may have influenced Webster most was the death of Prince Henry on November 6, 1612. We know, of course, that Webster wrote an elegiac poem, *A Monumental Columne* (1613), to commemorate the Prince's death, as did many others; and later in his only Lord Mayor's Show, *Monuments of Honor* (1624), Webster offered an apotheosis of Henry complete with representation of him.⁸ Brown suggests: "Probably Webster was working on Act III in late November or December of 1612, for he took time off from play-writing to provide an elegy for Prince Henry . . . which has numerous echoes of *The Duchess*, especially of its third Act . . ." (p. xvii). Webster and the Prince were both free of the Merchant Taylors, and of course the Prince was much celebrated as a patron of arts. The funeral observance for the Prince may have a bearing on Webster's wax figures and suggest something of the nature of these effigies.

In his edition Lucas observes: "A year or two before this play was acted, the citizens had watched a wax effigy of the dead Prince Henry borne through the London streets."⁹ Lucas cites an eighteenth-

⁷See for example R. G. Howarth, "Webster's Vincentio Lauriola," *N & Q*, 2 (1955), 99-100.

⁸For further details see my *English Civic Pageantry 1558-1642* (London and Columbia, South Carolina, 1971), pp. 207-212.

⁹F. L. Lucas, ed., *The Duchess of Malfi* (London, 1958), p. 187.

century source, Thomas Birch, *The Life of Prince Henry*, for a description of the funeral procession. Brown's gloss on IV.i.112-114 only echoes Lucas. I amplify Lucas' suggestion in order to demonstrate the possible relevance of Henry's effigy to Webster's artificial figures. The tradition of bearing a "representation" or effigy of the deceased atop the coffin was well-established, especially for funerals of royalty. The demand was that this figure resemble as far as possible the real person, and the artistic effort was expended on the face and hands with the rest of the body garbed in the regal habit. These effigies were often set up, as in Westminster Abbey, for display. The effigy of Henry was only the most recent that Webster and his audience could have seen.

A contemporary account notes: "Munday, the 7. of December, (the Funerall day) the representation [i.e., effigy] was layd vpon the Corps, and both together put into an open Chariot, and so proceeded. . . ." ¹⁰ This source indicates that the artificial figure of Henry was "inuested with his Robes of estate of Purple Veluet . . ." (sig. B4v). A picture of the Prince's effigy on the hearse is contained in Henry Holland's *Herwologia Anglica* (1620) (sig. E2). Certainly if this drawing is at all reliable, the effigy resembles the actual person whose body lies in the coffin below.¹¹ Information from the Lord Chamberlain's Records reveals a payment of £9 "for makinge the bodye of a figure for the rep^rsentation of His Highness w^t several joints both in the arms legges and bodie to be moved to sundrie accions first for the Carriage in the Chariot and then for the standinge and for settinge uppe the same in the Abbye. . . ." ¹² And from the same records is the payment of £10 "To Abraham Vanderdort for the face and hands of the Princes representation being very curiouslie wrought . . ." (p. 555). The concern of Webster and Shakespeare to name the artist may be interpreted not only as striving for verisimilitude but also simply reflecting actual practice.

In Webster's play, no sooner has the Duchess discovered the dead man's hand than she must witness the spectacle described in the stage direction: "*Here is discovered, behind a traverse, the artificial figures of Antonio and his children, appearing as if they were dead*" (IV.i.55

¹⁰*The Funerals of the High and Mighty Prince Henry* (London, 1613), sig. A4.

¹¹For additional information about royal effigies, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 419-437.

¹²Recorded in W. H. St. John Hope, "On the Funeral Effigies of the Kings and Queens of England. . . ." *Archaeologia*, 50, pt. ii (1907), 555.

S.D.). In order to enhance the verisimilitude of the spectacle Bosola encourages the Duchess to believe that the dead man's hand which she has examined is from this tableau: "Look you: here's the piece from which 'twas ta'en" (56). And he says of the figures, "they are dead" (58). In the dimly lit setting the Duchess accepts the "reality" of the wax representations; and she claims that "it wastes me more/ Than were't my picture, fashion'd out of wax,/ Stuck with a magical needle . . ." (62-64). Having endured the hell of this torture, she exits. Ferdinand is greatly pleased with the results:

Excellent: as I would wish; she's plagu'd in art.
 These presentations are but fram'd in wax,
 By the curious master in that quality,
 Vincentio Lauriola, and she takes them
 For true substantial bodies. (111-115)

Even Bosola pleads for an end to the cruelty (117-118), but Ferdinand is not finished with the horrors that he would inflict on his sister in this tedious theater of the world. It is instructive to contrast the wax figures that "plague in art" with the figure of Hermione in *Winter's Tale* which "mocks" life (V.iii.19-20). The difference is that between destruction in the former and renewal of life in the latter, or between tragedy and comedy.

Wherever the inspiration may have come from for these artificial figures "fram'd in wax," they would on stage likely resemble funeral effigies with which the audience was familiar. As effigies they must bear significant resemblance to the actual characters so that the Duchess will take them for corpses of the "true substantial bodies." Though there is no indication in the text, the figures should probably be in some sort of natural pose, as was becoming common with funeral effigies of this period,¹³ not in the funereal pose that Bosola mocks later (IV.ii.156-162). Though the theater audience is initially caught in the stage illusion of these wax figures, Webster finally widens the ironic gap of perspective by informing us and letting the Duchess persist in the belief that the figures truly are Antonio and the children dead.

Bosola and the madmen must play their parts in the final scene of the Duchess' life. In turn the Duchess, the children, and Cariola are strangled after the show of the madmen in IV.ii. Ferdinand enters after the horrendous deeds, and he asks: "Is she dead?" (256). But Bosola is more intent on the children, and the stage direction is:

¹³See Eric Mercer, *English Art 1553-1625* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), p. 247.

"Shows the Children strangled" (257 S.D.). Bosola plaintively asks, "Alas, how have these offended?" (258). This spectacle of the children ironically counterpoints the earlier display of wax figures, for we now see the real children truly dead—life imitates art. Again Bosola is moved to pity, but Ferdinand persists in these deeds of darkness. After Ferdinand exits, the Duchess rouses herself for two final words. She first cries out, "Antonio!" (349); to which Bosola responds: "Yes, madam, he is living—/ The dead bodies you saw were but feign'd statues . . ." (350-351). And the Duchess' dying word is "Mercy!" (353).¹⁴ From the beginning of the persecution the wax figures weave in and out of the dramatic display and dialogue, reinforcing the centrality of the image for Webster. The Duchess dies secure in the illusion that all is well with Antonio and her children. This illusion now replaces the illusion of the artificial figures in IV.i.

The artificial figures of death epitomize Webster's concern for funeral monuments; the play is thus not only preoccupied with death but also concerned with how death is commemorated. The pattern of references is set in motion in the opening scene of the play and comes full circle to tragic consequences in the fourth act. In the active wooing of Antonio, the Duchess gives him her wedding ring and places it on his finger (I.i.414), one sign of their new relationship. But with what terrible irony Ferdinand in IV.i gives her a dead man's hand: "I will leave this ring with you for a love-token;/ And the hand, as sure as the ring . . ." (IV.i.46-47). The ring that had betokened love and marriage has become in Act IV the first tangible symbol of death. In horror the Duchess cries for lights, but the lights only make it possible for her to see the wax figures. The two events together are emblematic of the transmutation from joy and hope to grotesque expressions of death and destruction.

Pressing her case to a somewhat hesitant Antonio, the Duchess says: "This is flesh, and blood, sir;/ 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster/ Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man!" (I.i.453-455). Throughout the early part of the play the Duchess emphasizes life and the future, not some cold monument to death and the past. But tragic irony prevails in IV.i, where she witnesses those seemingly real figures of Antonio and the children; now she too is ready to accept death and become finally a cased-up relic fit for a

¹⁴Lucas' explanation is mystifying: ". . . it seems to me much more likely to be a last half-conscious appeal to her murderers to spare her" (p. 197). She has already been strangled and only Bosola is present.

tomb. The outward movement of the play has become constricted by death and tragedy.

When the Duchess claims that she is not an alabaster figure kneeling at her husband's tomb, Webster seems to have in mind traditional examples of funerary sculpture. One common motif was the portrayal of the widow and children of the deceased kneeling around the tomb.¹⁵ Among the materials used for the monuments, besides the obvious marble, was alabaster, according to a seventeenth-century source.¹⁶ And we recall Othello's image as he looks at the sleeping Desdemona whose blood he'll not shed, "Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth, as monumental alabaster . . ." (V.ii.4-5).¹⁷ Webster's audience would also be familiar with the recently completed marble statues of Queen Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots, placed on their tombs in Westminster Abbey. Such figures are another type of funeral effigy. In contrast to the alabaster figure of mourning, the Duchess cries out for life and a "resurrection" of love: "Awake, awake, man!"

The most developed treatment of the image of tombs comes in IV.ii, a dramatic and logical development of those images of death in IV.i, the artificial figures. Speaking to Cariola of her suffering, the Duchess asks, "who do I look like now?" (IV.ii.30); and Cariola replies:

Like to your picture in the gallery,
A deal of life in show, but none in practice;
Or rather like some reverend monument
Whose ruins are even pitied. (31-34)

The one who valued life so highly has begun to resemble a ruined monument.¹⁸ Her pain is exacerbated by the arrival of several Madmen who sing, talk, and dance. These Madmen, it may be argued, are themselves "ruined monuments" of sanity. They sing of death, talk of doomsday, hell, and tombs, thus providing an external, if grotesque, form to the inward suffering of the Duchess.

¹⁵For discussion and illustrations see, J. G. Mann, "English Church Monuments, 1536-1625," *Walpole Society*, 21 (1932-33), 1-22. Also helpful is Mercer's *English Art*, pp. 217-261, and plates 77, 83, 86, 87, and 89.

¹⁶John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (London, 1631), p. 10.

¹⁷See my essay, "'Let's talk of graves': *Othello*, V.ii.5," *Mississippi Folklore Register*, 10 (1976), 154-162.

¹⁸While Webster may be referring to any sort of ruined structure, a possible anticipation of the "Echo scene" (V.iii), he may mean, as I suggest, a sepulchre (OED cites this as the first substantive meaning), or even a carved figure or effigy (OED 5.c.). The context suggests a structure of some sort, and a tomb is surely not far-fetched.

After the dance of the Madmen, Bosola enters, not as Bosola but dressed like an old man, as if Webster wants some dramatic and psychological distance between the Duchess and the one who comes to send her to her tomb, to give an abstract, almost allegorical quality to Bosola's function.¹⁹ He readily announces to the Duchess his purpose: "I am come to make thy tomb" (115). Bosola's function as tomb-maker is nicely ambiguous: he has clearly come to make the Duchess ready for death, and he also implies that he makes or carves tombs—another version of Vincentio Lauriola. With the role that he now assumes Bosola brings the reality of death, just as earlier the wax figures represented death. The Duchess' claim, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (141), is not only her final assertion of personal dignity but also her final claim for life. But Bosola reminds her: "My trade is to flatter the dead, not the living—I am a tomb-maker" (147-148). In his professional pose he satirically comments on the style of funeral effigies placed on tombs, saying that "princes' images on their tombs do not lie, as they were wont, seeming to pray up to heaven, but with their hands under their cheeks, as if they died of the tooth-ache; they are not carved with their eyes fixed upon the stars, but as their minds were wholly bent upon the world, the selfsame way they seem to turn their faces" (156-162). The biting truth of Bosola's description not only reflects Webster's awareness of funerary sculpture but also intensifies yet again the play's connection between death and the commemoration of it. Though the Duchess is not an alabaster figure, she does finally kneel before her own tomb, figuratively, as she accepts death (l. 234). She says "when I am laid out,/ They [her brothers] then may feed in quiet" (236-237)—laid out in the tomb. The world that had seemed to lie before the Duchess "like a land of dreams,/ So various, so beautiful, so new,/ Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light. . . ."²⁰ The darkling plain of Act IV has presented artificial figures of death and finally the reality of death itself.

The grave is not a fine and quiet place, but rather, in Webster's images, connotes decay and ruin beyond death of the person. Those

¹⁹In an essay that nicely complements my treatment of the play Joan M. Lord focuses on the issue of death in the play, its ceremonial qualities, and the Duchess' personal triumph. But in her discussion of the episode of the Madmen and Bosola's return, she fails to observe the essential fact that Bosola is now disguised. I believe that stage fact colors his response to the Duchess at this point, and indeed heightens the issue of death by making him seem remote, out of his usual character. Her essay is "*The Duchess of Malfi: 'the Spirit of Greatness' and 'of Woman,'*" *SEL*, 16 (1976), 305-317.

²⁰Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," ll. 31-33.

two whited sepulchres, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, are described by Bosola: "You have a pair of hearts are hollow graves,/ Rotten, and rotting others . . ." (IV.ii.319-320). As we recall, Cariola's assessment of the Duchess is that she looks like a ruined monument (IV.ii.33-34). This motif concludes with Bosola's final analysis of himself and the world, found in his dying words: "O, I am gone!—/ We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,/ That ruin'd, yields no echo . . ." (V.v.96-98). A tomb or effigy may offer an artistic response to death, but they cannot mask the reality; and in Webster's view even the monuments are in a state of ruin, further extending the process of destruction.

The good that Bosola would do only results in the ironic slaying of Antonio; at that point the wax effigies have fulfilled their prophetic role as the dramatic reality overtakes the artistic illusion. Thus in the larger play world of *The Duchess of Malfi* the artificial figures of IV.i are not an isolated, peculiar episode, but rather a terrifying part of a pattern. The characters in the action are plagued with Webster's tragic art as he, the supreme tomb-maker, sends them to their little, little graves, some with dignity, some with shame.²¹

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²¹The BBC television production of the play skilfully handled the artificial figures in IV.i, though Ferdinand omitted reference to Lauriola. Bosola's speech about images on tombs, IV.ii.156-162, was also omitted. In the part of the scene in which Bosola is tomb-maker, he was appropriately dressed in black.