

“THIS INTEMPERATE NOISE”:¹

MUSIC AND SOUND IN *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*

The Duchess of Malfi is a play “full of noises”; however, as opposed to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, from whose play the phrase is borrowed,² these “noises”³ are not expressive of harmony, but of chaos and death. From the “solemn ditty” sung by the Churchmen in 3.4 to the echo scene (5.3), the soundscape of the tragedy is composed of “intemperate noises.” This presentation uses the masque of the madmen (4.2) as a starting-point to show how music, besides having a structural function in the plot, is also part of the symbolic structures of the play.

The masque of the madmen

Structurally speaking, the masque of the madmen includes a song, “O let us howl some heavy note”, a dialogue between the madmen, and the whole episode is rounded off with the dance of eight madmen. First, what may this scene have sounded like?

The song “O let us howl some heavy note” was written by Robert Johnson for The King’s Men, the theatrical company of the

-
1. *Cardinal*. How idly shows this rage, which carries you,
As men conveyed by witches through the air,
On violent whirlwinds! This intemperate noise
Fittly resembles deaf men’s shrill discourse,
Who talk aloud, thinking all other men
To have their imperfection. (2.5.50-55).
 2. *Caliban*. Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 3.2.130-31)
 3. “The indefinite term ‘noise’ is most often used to describe loud, unmusical sounds, the meaning in common usage today. But in Elizabethan times it could also have several musical meanings. It could refer to pleasant music [...], the sound of angels singing [...], or it could signify an ensemble of instruments or voices” (Christopher R. Wilson and Michela Calore, *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary*, [London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2005] 309).

Blackfriars, to which Shakespeare belonged.⁴ As was the rule in the Renaissance, the music uses word-painting. It is indeed the “dismal kind of music” described in the didascalia. Robert Johnson dramatizes the song by using, among other features, dissonance in the harmony, capricious intervals, unexpected turns in the melodic line, longer values to underline important words (“howl”, “heavy”). However, in the third quatrain of the song, which evokes the swan song and a more peaceful idea of death, the music becomes much more consonant, with a flowing melodic line.⁵

The masque of the madmen is based on the conventions of the court masque, a lavish entertainment which was very fashionable at the turn of the 17th century. It celebrated, in allegorical form, the virtues of the king or of the newly-weds on the frequent occasions when it was performed for a wedding.⁶ Court masques included songs, spoken passages and dances, indeed like the masque in Webster’s tragedy; or rather like the debased version of a masque that the dramatist proposes, since it is more an antimasque than a masque. The antimasque was an episode which Ben Jonson introduced in the court masque from 1609, as a counterpoint to the serious main story, which staged noble allegories (like Harmony or Peace) or classical gods endowed with the same symbolic function (Apollo, Venus, Neptune, Jupiter, Flora for instance in *The Masque of the Lord Hayes*). The characters of the antimasque were typically devils, wild men, or witches, meant to set off the idea, central in any court

4. Robert Johnson wrote for The King’s Men between 1610 and 1617. See for instance the Introduction to John P. Cutt’s edition of the songs, in *La musique de scène de la troupe de Shakespeare The King’s Men sous le règne de Jacques Ier* (Paris: CNRS, 1966) xi-xlvi.

5. The music for the dance is lost (if any was composed specifically, which very often wasn’t the case – they would use whatever dance from the repertory that would fit their needs) and that was “answerable thereunto”, that is, appropriate to the subject, as the stage directions of the play indicate. We can have a good idea of what music would have been appropriate by listening to the *First Witches’ Dance*, written by Robert Johnson for the tragicomedy *The Witch*, by Thomas Middleton, also acted by The King’s Men between 1613 and 1616. In this dance, the evil nature of the witches is imaged through big leaps and intervals, a rapid dotted rhythm, changes in the rhythmic structure.

6. For instance, Thomas Campion’s *Masque of the Lord Hayes*, 1611, performed at Whitehall. For a fuller definition of the court masque, see the entry “Masque” in Wilson and Calore 265-69. For a discussion of the politics of the court masque, see for instance Skiles Howard, *The Politics of Courtly Dancing in Early Modern England* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998).

masque, of the victory of harmony, peace and order over discord. Normally the antimasque was placed at the beginning of the entertainment, to be followed by the first entry of the masquers; but in Webster's play no masque follows the antimasque. It is an antimasque without a masque, an evil chaos that is not remedied by redemptive figures. This treatment of the masque shows that Webster twists the genre to dramatic ends, as is underlined by the structural function of the antimasque. It is indeed the climax of the morbid pantomime of death made up by the tableaux of act 4. The degradation of the masque underlines the evil purpose of Ferdinand and his hypocrisy in pretending that the performance of the madmen will cure the Duchess of her melancholy.

The lyrics of the song also convey the idea. They use music-related images which point to the linkage of love, madness and death, a central theme of the play.

Bird imagery

The madmen's song mentions several night birds which were conventional omens of death: "fatal fowl" like the raven and the screech-owl. Such "fatal fowl" illustrate the structural function of musical imagery as they pervade the play, entwining the ideas of love and death. For instance, the dialogue between the madmen which follows the song develops the ideas introduced in the lyrics, especially the link between birds and death,⁷ as well as the link with the idea of physical love.⁸ At the end of the scene, Bosola mentions the screech-owl again in his sinister *memento mori* of a lullaby, which he chants while he rings the bell (which was rung in Newgate on the night before executions, to remind prisoners of their mortality and exhort them to repentance). So that the whole scene rings with the sounds of impending death.

The "fatal fowl" are also a symbolic conveyance of love and death in many other passages of the play, especially in 2.2, when Bosola, who has heard the Duchess cry out in the pains of childbirth, mistakes the sound for the cry of the owl. As he frequently does in the

7. See also 4.2.105-06: "*Mad doctor*. I have pared the devil's nails forty times, roasted them in raven's eggs, and cured agues with them."

8. See also 4.2.81-82: "*Mad Priest*. I will lie with every woman in my parish the tenth night; I will tithe over them, like haycocks."

tragedy, Webster telescopes the images of life and death, here with terrible effect since the infant is presented as doomed even before he has left his mother's womb:

Bosola. Sure I did hear a woman shriek: list, ha?
 And the sound came, if I received it right,
 From the Duchess' lodgings.
 [...]
 List again!
 It may be 'twas the melancholy bird,
 Best friend of silence and of solitariness,
 The owl, that screamed so. (2.3.1-3; 6-9)

However, the second part of the song contrasts the "fatal fowl" with the swan, which also belongs to the aviary of death. The image of the swan singing for the first and last time just before its death dates back to classical times and was commonplace in the Renaissance.⁹

But unlike the "fatal fowl", the swan is an image of peaceful, even harmonious death. The bird was indeed associated with Orpheus, a central figure of divine harmony.¹⁰ And from the start, it had been the prophetic bird of Apollo, an emblem of wisdom, the melodious guide of souls in death. Through this contrast between "fatal fowl" and swan, the song actually illustrates the music of hell, whose characteristic it was in the Renaissance to be ambivalent: it could be harsh and discordant, or on the contrary soft and seductive.¹¹

9. See for instance the description of the emblem "The Swan" in Henry Hawkins, *Partheneia Sacra* (London, 1633) 267-71; or Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epistemica* (London, 1646), vol. 2, p.290-91: "And first from great Antiquity, and before the Melody of Syrens, the Musical Note of Swans hath been commended, and that they sing most sweetly before their death. For thus we read in Plato, that from the opinion of Metempsychosis, or transmigration of the souls of men into the bodies of beasts most suitable unto their humane condition, after his death, Orpheus the musician became a swan. This was it the bird of Apollo the god of Musick by the Greeks; and an Hieroglyphyck of musick among the Egyptians."

10. See Nicoletta Guidobaldi, "Image of Music in Cesare Ripa's Iconologia", *Imago Musicae* 7 (1990): 41-68, esp. 45-46; Linda Phyllis Austern, "Nature, Culture, Myth, and the Musician in Early Modern England, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51 (1998): 1-47, esp. 3-7.

11. Not to mention the link of the swan with the representation of the human soul: Bosola, just after the madmen's masque, also images the soul trying to break free from the body as a bird striving to escape its cage: "*Bosola.* Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body" (4.2.123). On the ambivalence of the

Bird imagery in the madmen's song certainly illustrates the Baroque aesthetics of contrast which characterizes Webster's play; but it also epitomizes the ambivalent and often debased use of music and sound as symbolic conveyances. Indeed, the treatment of music in the lyrics has philosophical implications which underline the idea of chaos in the scene, of the reversal of normal order. In the first part of the song, the howling of the madmen is compared to the inarticulate and harsh voices of birds (of omen) and animals (of prey), "ravens, screech-owls, bulls, and bears."¹² Human music is thus symbolically reduced to mere noise, which is a significant reversal of the hierarchy of musical value. It is significant given that in the philosophy of the time, the human voice was deemed superior to any kind of natural music, even the most elaborate or beautiful (typically the song of the swan and of the nightingale, symbols of music in the process of metamorphosing into human art). In this system the voice of man would always rank above the voice of beast; whereas in the song – and as underlined by the musical setting – the voice of the swan ranks above the hideous voices of the madmen.

The treatment of music and sound in the masque of the madmen also pinpoints the gap between the surface meaning of the scene – officially intended to bring the Duchess "by degrees to mortification" (4.2.167), to prepare her for her death in the tradition of the *ars moriendi* – and Ferdinand's real purpose, which is to torture her. Elsewhere in the play, musical imagery is also often used to expose hypocrisy.

music of the devil, see Nigel Wilkins, *La musique du diable* (Mardaga, 1999) and Claire Bardelmann, "'Musicke in some ten languages': les musiques du diable dans le théâtre élisabéthain", François Laroque, Franck Lessay, eds., *Enfers et délices à la Renaissance* (Paris : Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2003) 15-30.

12. What's more, the animals and birds mentioned in the song are carefully chosen for their associations with brutality (the bull), savagery (the bear), quite in tune with the bestiary of the play which abounds in wild beasts, especially carnivorous animals, birds of prey, and animals trained to kill (tiger, fox, bloodhounds, mastiff, eagle) and animals which ranked low in the Renaissance hierarchy of beings (snake, snail, fish and shellfish like salmon and shrimp), not to mention legendary creatures traditionally associated with hell (the salamander, the basilisk, the cockatrice).

Musical images of hypocrisy

For instance, in Delio and Antonio's discussion of the character of the Cardinal in 1.2., Delio describes the Cardinal as the perfect courtier, making a list of his achievements which answers the descriptions found in such treatises as Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.¹³ The perfect courtier is a model of harmony, of which his musical skills are an important sign, particularly dancing skills, at a time when grace of the body was thought to display a harmonious soul. In the Cardinal, however, dancing and other courtly achievements are but "superficial flashes." The allusion to dancing contributes to emphasize the discrepancy between perfect courtier and "political monster":

Delio. Now, sir, your promise: what's that Cardinal? I mean his temper? They say he's a brave fellow,
Will play his five thousand crowns at tennis, **dance** [emphasis mine],

Court ladies, and one that hath fought single combats.

Antonio. Some such flashes superficially hang on him, for form. But observe his inward character: he is a melancholy churchman.

The spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads; where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than ever was imposed on Hercules:

for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters. (1.2.77-88).

Musical imagery is also often used to describe the sexual politics of the play, to pinpoint the harsh gap between what Ferdinand wishes to be and the reality of the Duchess' desire. A prime example is the equivocation in 1.1 about the definition of that "part, which like the lamprey, hath ne'er a bone in' t" and that women "like." Neither character fails to get the point, yet both try to skim around the bawdy innuendo, Ferdinand by saying untruthfully that he meant the tongue, not the penis, and the Duchess by protesting, as a chaste woman would:

Ferdinand. A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms

13. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier. Done into English by Sir Thomas Hoby* (London, 1561). On the place of music in the gentleman's education, see for instance Marcia Vale, *The Gentleman's recreations: Accomplishments and Pastimes of the English Gentleman 1580-1630* (London: The Benham P, 1977) and D. Brailsford, *Sport and Society. Elizabeth to Anne* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) chapter 3 "Exercise, Education and Social Attitudes, 1600-1650."

That were ne'er built for goodness: fare ye well:
 And women like that part which, like the lamprey,
 Hath ne'er a bone in't.
Duchess. Fie, sir!
Ferdinand. Nay,
 I mean the tongue; variety of courtship.
 What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale
 Make a woman believe? Farewell, lusty widow. (1.2.325-30)

By pointing at the murky reality of lust, the duplicity of language suggests that the Duchess does not quite correspond to the Early Modern ideal woman, who was unambiguously chaste. In the medical theory of the time, it was thought that there was physical communication between the feminine organs of reproduction and the organs of the voice. This gave a physiological basis to the preoccupation of controlling the feminine voice, which was a universal concern in the educational literature of the time.¹⁴ The dissident feminine voice was narrowly associated to uncontrollable sexuality, seen as a threat to order; which is why the symbolic locus of a woman's virtue was her voice. The ideal woman was, indeed, described as a "silent woman."¹⁵ It meant that her every utterance, in both content and manner, was to show respect of the established order. In this system, chastity ranked first among the qualities that the feminine voice demonstrated, by being soft, modest and full of restraint.

14. On the politics of the feminine voice, see in particular Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Sing Againe Syren': the female musician and Sexual enchantment in Elizabethan Life and Literature", *Renaissance Quarterly* 42:3 (Autumn 1989) 420-48, esp. 420-29; Leslie C. Dunn and Katherine R. Larson, eds., *Gender and Song in Early Modern England* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014); Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters. Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Totowa, NJ: Harvester P, 1983); Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1991); Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, 1956 (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1978).

15. In *The English Gentlewoman* (London, 1631), p. 41, Richard Brathwaite gives a prime example of this emphasis on the feminine voice in his definition of the ideal woman: "what is spoken of maids, may be properly applied by an useful consequence to all women: They should be seen, and not heard: A Traveller sets himself best out by discourse, whereas their best setting out is silence (...) In one word, as modesty gives the best grace to your behavior, so moderation of speech to your discourse. Silence in a Woman is a moving Rhetoricke, winning most, when in words it woeth least."

The musical characterization of the Duchess' sexuality

In Webster's tragedy, the musical imagery associated to the Duchess underlines the discrepancy between this ideal and the reality of desire. This imagery draws on the two polarized but complementary figures which epitomize the perils of the feminine voice in countless theoretical and literary sources: the siren and the shrew.

The composite image of the tongue as lamprey/penis, for instance, evokes another "fish tale", another hybrid, the siren, half-woman, half-fish, a very common emblematic representation of the dangerous seductions of the voice.¹⁶ These perils were also symbolized in such emblems as Whitney's by the traditional association of sexuality with the lower part of the body.

Such perils were usually feminine, although male seducers are also occasionally described as sirens in Early Modern drama, which is the case here. But the Duchess is also, in her own way, a siren, as shown by the dangerous ambivalence of her seductive voice in her portrait, made by Antonio at the beginning of the play. It can be paralleled with the similarly ominous portrait of the many vocal perfections of Anne in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, in which Anne's musical skill announces her capacity for adultery.¹⁷ Like Anne's, on the surface level, the Duchess' portrait is based on the conventional idea that a woman's perfections were epitomized by her voice: skilled, but soft, modest and restrained.

Antonio. But for their sister, the right noble Duchess,

16. In addition to Linda Phyllis Austern, "Sing Again Syren", and for a study of sirens in European emblems in the Renaissance, see Elena Laura Calogero, *Ideas and Images of Music in English and Continental Emblem Books 1550-1700* (Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 2009) 96-122.

17. *Sir Charles.* You have a wife
So qualified, and with such ornaments
Both of the mind and body. First, her birth
Is noble, and her education such
As might become the daughter of a prince,
Her own tongue speaks all tongues, and her own hand
Can teach all strings to speak in their best grace,
From the shrill treble, to the hoarsest base.
To end her many praises in one word,
She's beauty and perfection's eldest daughter. (1.1.14-21)

Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1607), ed. Brian Scobie [London: New Mermaids, 1985].

You never fix'd your eye on three fair medals,
 Cast in one figure, of so different temper:
For her discourse, it is so full of rapture,
 You only will begin then to be sorry
 When she doth end her **speech**, and wish, in wonder,
 She held it less vainglory to **talk** much,
 Than your penance to **hear** her: **whilst she speaks,**
She throws upon a man so sweet a look,
That it were able to raise one to a galliard
That lay in a dead palsy, and to dote
 On that sweet countenance; but in that look
 There **speaketh** [emphasis mine] so divine a countenance
 As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope. (1.1.325-30)

However, Antonio's portrait of the Duchess is also quite in tune with contemporary descriptions of the dangerous voice of "sirens", which would lead them to the hell of lust. Like the sirens', the Duchess' voice is "so full of rapture" that it entrances her listener. Even the seductions of the Duchess' "looks" are described as a potent voice (since her looks "speak"). The idea is underlined by related dance imagery, that of the "galliard", a 16th-century dance.¹⁸ The Duchess' eyes are described as able to "raise one to a galliard / That lay in a dead palsy." The image is certainly a suggestive one, because of the strong physicality of the dance. The galliard was a very vigorous dance which involved many leaps, and allowed the dancers, especially the gentlemen, to show they were physically fit (the dance was an opportunity to show off a shapely leg). It was a display not just of one's dancing skills, but also of one's virility; mentions of the galliard in Early Modern drama are for this reason very often sexualized,¹⁹ as indeed the dance is in this scene, especially given the

18. "Originating in late-fifteenth century Italy, the galliard was a fairly vigorous courtly dance in triple time. A variant of the *cinque pas*, Arbeau (*Orchesography*, 1589) described its choreography as a basic pattern of four *grues* (a hop and a kick step on alternate feet) and one *saut majeur* (a high leap). It was common, together with measures and corantos, in the revels of English courtly masques" (Wilson and Calore 187). On dance symbolism, see in particular Alan Brissenden, *Shakespeare and the Dance* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities P, 1981) esp. 1-17; Alessandro Arcangeli, "Moral Views on Dance", *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politic 1250-1750*, ed. Jenifer Nevile (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008) 282-94.

19. The dance was often sexualized (as was the case of most dances). In *Women Beware Women*, Thomas Middleton provides an example of the sexualization of the galliard (or "cinquepace"):

sexual meaning of “raising” or “rousing.” Antonio is probably aware that his portrait is not giving quite the right impression, which is why at the end of his tirade he finds it useful to precise that despite all her seductions, the Duchess remains an image of “countenance.” But the portrait remains, to say the least, ambivalent.

The image of the galliard raising a man from the dead recalls the motif of the dance of death: indeed, the musical characterization of the Duchess’ sexuality clearly links music with the theme of Eros and Thanatos. All the more so as her voice shares the polarization of hellish music which characterizes the madmen’s song. At the other end of the symbolic spectrum, she is associated to the harsh noise which conventionally described the voice of the shrew, whose dreaded figure was another departure from the cultural norm of the “silent woman”, and whose unruly voice was, like the siren’s, linked to erotic disorder.²⁰ In 3.2, Ferdinand silences the Duchess by saying: “The howling of a wolf / Is music to thee, screech-owl; prithee peace” (3.2.88-89).²¹ Then, Ferdinand develops the idea of silencing the unruly voice through several images of dumbness: he refers to the “dumb” voices of animals (“dumb” meaning, in this context, devoid of reason), then to dumbness as useless repetition (the parrot), and finally to dumbness as the result of mutilation.²²

Ward. This is she brought up so courtly, can sing, and dance – and tumble too methinks. I’ll never marry wife again that has so many qualities.

[...]

Her father praised her breast, sh’had the voice forsooth: I marveled she sung so small indeed, being no maid. Now I perceive ther’s a young chorister in her belly – this breeds a singing in my head I’m sure.

Sordido. ‘Tis but the tune of your wife’s cinquepace, dancd in a feather-bed. (Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, 4.2.105-06, 119-24).

20. On the politics of the shrew, see Linda Boose, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42:2 (Summer 1991): 179-213. See also note 22.

21. Is the image of the wolf linked to pathological love in Ferdinand’s mind? The Doctor at act 5.2 certainly mentions lycanthropy, one of the symptoms of love melancholy according to Burton. See Jackie Pigeaud, “Reflections on Love-Melancholy in Robert Burton”, *Eros and Anteros: The Medical traditions of Love in the Renaissance*, ed. Donald A. Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1992) 211-31, esp. 221-23.

22. There was a strong association between the mutilation of the tongue and unlawful sex, as exemplified for instance by Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, which uses the Ovidian palimpsest of the tale of Philomel. On this subject, see Csilla Kelemen, “Images of Passion, Rape, and Grief: A Comparative Analysis of Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*”, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 11:1 (Spring 2005): 151-73.

Ferdinand. Let dogs and monkeys
 Only converse with him, and such dumb things
 To whom nature denies use to sound his name.
 Do not keep a paraquito, lest she learn it.
 If thou do love him, cut out thine own tongue
 Lest it bewray him. (3.2.104-09)

The images Ferdinand uses (the parrot, wolves, dogs) are the same as those which conventionally described the unruly voice of shrews, which in turn characterized their disturbing sexuality.²³ The musical characterization of the Duchess' sexuality underlines its link with pathological love and madness;²⁴ indeed excessive love, pathological love was described as madness.²⁵ In his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton says of human love that "if it rage, it is no more love, but burning lust, a disease, frenzy, madness, hell."²⁶

23. See for instance the description of the voice of the shrew in the anonymous pamphlet *Poor Robin's true Character of a Scold*: "That nature long since finding many of her sons oft-bewitched to their own ruin by the charms of women, for their punishment contrived this monster called A Scold: to form which, She first took of the tongues and galls of bulls, bears, wolves, magpies, parrots, cuckoos, and nightingales, of each a like number: The tongues and tails of vipers, adders, snakes and lizards, seven apiece: aurum fulminans, aqua fortis and gunpowder, of each one pound: the clappers of nineteen bells, and the pestles of a dozen apothecaries' mortars" (Pamphlet *Poor Robin's true Character of a Scold*, Charles Hindley, ed., *The Roxburghe Ballads*, 2 vols. [London, 1873-1874] 2.5).

24. The masque of the madmen is the most conspicuous example of this cluster of images in the tragedy. Indeed, there is a theoretical basis to Ferdinand's idea that hearing madmen will cure the Duchess (who agrees, even though ironically, that "nothing but noise and folly/ Can keep me in my right wits" [4.2.6-7]). The cure of pathological love, such as Ferdinand assumes the Duchess' is, was through shock therapy, for instance in "torture houses" where erotomania was treated by massive bloodletting or by applying a burning object to the pericranium (Beecher and Ciavolletta 82-83).

25. The play is full of images of deafness and dumbness, which work in clusters with other important images of the tragedy; hypocrisy is thus described as voluntary deafness: "*First officer.* He stopped his ears with black wool; and to those came to him for money, said he was thick of hearing" (3.2. 220-21).

26. Burton describes the consequences of pathological love in a list that encompasses the entire spectrum of the loathsome effects of love; they certainly meet many echoes in the imagery of disease, torture and death in *The Duchess*. "Besides those daily monomachies, murders, effusion of blood, rapes, riot, and immoderate expense, to satisfie their lusts, beggary, shame, loss, torture, punishment, disgrace, loathsome diseases that proceed from hence, worse than calentures and pestilent fevers, those often gouts, pox, arthritis, palsies, cramps, sciatica, convulsions, aches, combustions, etc, which torment the body, and feral melancholy which crucifies the

Such images also apply to Ferdinand, suggesting not just the madness of his fury, but also the incestuous drive behind his mad jealousy. Of his ranting and raving in 2.5, even the Cardinal says that it is “intemperate anger” which puts him “out of tune”, whereas a well-tuned instrument was a commonplace image of order in the microcosm.²⁷

The sexualization of music and the ethical degradation of the harmonic ideal

Throughout the tragedy, Webster plays with this conventional association of music to harmony, which he reverses into images of erotic disorder and intuitions of death. The best example is the treatment of the allusion to the music of the spheres in the wedding scene, 1.1:

Duchess. Be not amazed, this woman's of my counsel.
I have heard lawyers say, a contract in a chamber
Per verba de presenti is absolute marriage.
Bless, heaven, this sacred Gordian, which let violence
Never untwine.

Antonio. **And may our sweet affections, like the spheres,
Be still in motion.**

Duchess. **Quickening, and make
The like soft music** [emphasis mine].

Antonio. That we may imitate the loving palms,
Best emblem of a peaceful marriage,
That ne'er bore fruit divided. (1.1. 467-77)

The music of the spheres is a theory which dates back to Pythagoras and Aristotle and according to which each of the spheres (the planets) emitted a sound as it moved; together, these sounds created a well-tuned world music which was, of course, ordained by God, and as such entirely theoretical, inaudible by human ears.²⁸ The

soul in the life, and everlastingly torments in the world to come” (Beecher and Ciavolletta 213).

27. Hamlet for instance uses the metaphor of tuning to protest of his sanity to Gertrude: “My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time / And makes as healthful music. It is not madness / That I have uttered” (3.4.143-45).

28. For a summary of the theory of speculative music, see for instance Daniel Pickering Walker, *Studies in Musical Science in the Late Renaissance* (London: Brill, 1978) 1-13. For valuable surveys of heavenly harmony, see in particular James Daly, “Harmony and Political Thinking in Early Stuart England”, *Transactions of the*

theory was such a staple of the Early Modern world picture that it was universally used as a conventional metaphor of harmony, particularly to signify political harmony, or marital harmony, as here. But the reference to the harmony of the spheres is debased from being tainted with sexual allusion. The “motion of the spheres” suggests permanent friction of a kind, the nature of which is made explicit by the quibble on “quickenings”, which means “to accelerate” but also “to be pregnant”. So that the allusion to the music of the spheres is degraded into another portentous image of physical proximity.²⁹

Everywhere in the play, symbols of the harmonic ideal undergo a similar ethical degradation, as with the lute, an instrument which for symbolic reasons had a deep connection to speculative music.³⁰

The lute is mentioned in 2.4, to image the Cardinal’s claim that he would be a better lover than Julia’s husband:

Cardinal. I pray thee, kiss me.
 When thou wast with thy husband, thou wast watched
 Like a tame elephant; still you are to thank me.
 Thou hadst only kisses from him, and high feeding,
 But what delight was that? ‘Twas just like one
 That hath a little fingering on the lute,
 Yet cannot tune it: still you are to thank me. (2.4.30-36)

But the instrument is degraded into an explicit image of sexual intercourse, in which the woman is compared to a lute which is not

American Philosophical Society 69:7 (1979): 1-14; Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1994) esp. p. 67-74; John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500-1900* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961).

29. Antonio and the Duchess draw the attention to the physicality of their relationship by using several images of physical union, all ominous: the Gordian knot, which could only be severed by cutting it (as Alexander the Great did with his sword); the palm trees, which were thought to reproduce only if in close proximity to one another. But the image is ominous since it was an exemplum of the fury of love, used as such by Burton in his description of the “tyranny of love” in the book devoted to love melancholy of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.

30. For an analysis of the symbolism of the lute as the instrument of the music of the spheres, see for instance Claire Bardelmann, *Eros and Music in Early Modern Culture and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018) esp. 79-86. On the Elizabethan conception of the universe as a music instrument, see for instance Gretchen Ludke Finney, *Musical Background for English Literature: 1580-1650* (Westport: Greenwood P, 1962) 1-20. Among a sea of examples of angels playing the lute, see for instance Piero Della Francesca, *The Nativity*, c.1460-147, Oil on wooden panel, 124,4x122,6 cm, National Gallery, London.

just to be “fingered” but “tuned”: you can “finger” a lute, i.e. put the fingers on the frets and pluck the strings to produce sounds, but if the instrument is not tuned you will never produce music. The image refers to unskilled vs skilled love-making, the latter being expressed through another debased image of world harmony, tuning – normally a common image of harmony. The sexualization of the lute was very common in Renaissance imagery and painting,³¹ because as with all human music, music that tried to mediate, to embody the abstract notion of divine harmony, the symbolism of the instrument was ambivalent and could be reversed. Webster uses this ambivalence, but what is truly remarkable in *The Duchess of Malfi* is the complete lack of non-sexualized allusions.

Ultimately, the degraded music of the spheres becomes an anamorphosis of death, as best shown by the echo scene.

Music as the anamorphosis of death: the example of the echo scene

The echo scene, 5.3, relates to several, contradictory interpretations of the myth of Echo, which was the symbolic backdrop to the acoustic echo in the literary tradition of the Renaissance. One of the main interpretations of Echo in the Renaissance was as an oracular voice, the voice of God, and as such closely linked to the idea of world harmony.³² Some mythographers, like Cartari, even presented Echo as an analogue of the seven spheres

31. See for instance Bardelmann, *Eros and Music* 90-118. For an analysis of related emblems, see Calogero 77-95.

32. As exemplified by George Herbert's metaphysical poem “Heaven”:

O who will show me those delights on high?
 Echo. I.
 Thou Echo, thou art Mortall, all men know.
 Echo. No.

George Herbert, *The Temple* (1633), in Mario A. di Cesare ed., *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets* (New York: Norton, 1978) 68-69. In her commentary on Cartari's interpretation of the mythological figure, Françoise Graziani argues that Cartari presents Echo as an analogue of the seven spheres of the universe, moving in perfect harmony: “On ira jusqu'à l'assimiler très explicitement au verbe incarné, « qui est la note émise par l'intellect du Père » (Marino, *Dicerie Sacre*, II, « La Musica », 1614) (...) à travers le nombre sacré 7 qui lui est associé, aux sept paroles du Christ en croix, forme originelle de toute musique” (Françoise Graziani, « Écho », *Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires*, dir. Pierre Brunel [Paris: Ed. du Rocher, 1988] 532).

of the universe, moving in a perfect harmony, or as Norman Rabkin phrased it, as “a yearning of the human spirit for stasis, completion, perfection, and freedom from the mortal flaws with which it is paradoxically implicated.”³³ Webster twists this philosophical background, since the oracular function of the echo is used as an instrument of dramatic irony; it is not the voice of God, it is the voice of the Duchess; the only answer it brings is not “completion” or “perfection”, but death. So that the echo is a debased version of the oracular echo, it becomes, as Gisèle Venet wrote, “l'écho pervers, le seul possible dans l'univers webstérien.”³⁴ The associations of the echo with world harmony are degraded as the echo becomes the voice of fragmentation and decay, the aural equivalent of the ruins of the cloister, which were a common emblem of vanity in Baroque iconography.³⁵

Antonio. Echo, I will not talk with thee,
For thou art a dead thing.

Echo. Thou art a dead thing.

Antonio. My Duchess is asleep now,
And her little ones, I hope, sweetly. O heaven,
Shall I never see her more?

Echo. Never see her more. (5.3.38-43)

Some Renaissance mythographers, Arthur Golding for instance,³⁶ also interpreted the Ovidian Echo as a figure of the dangers of carnal desire and unquenched passion, which may well linger in the background of the echo scene, given the emphasis on the physicality of her desire elsewhere in the play: a last reminder of the link

33. Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York: The Free P, 1967) 28.

34. Gisèle Venet, *Temps et vision tragique : Shakespeare et ses contemporains* (Paris: P de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2003), p. 216.

35. See Alain Tapié, Jean-Marie Dautel, Philippe Rouillard, *Les Vanités dans la peinture au XVIII^e siècle : méditations sur la richesse, le dénouement et la rédemption : Ville de Caen, Musée des beaux-arts, 27 juillet-15 octobre 1990* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990).

36. In the foreword to Arthur Golding's *Metamorphose*, Echo emblemizes the vulgar Eros: “And Echo in the selfsame doth represent / The lewd behavior of a bawd, and his due punishment” (107-08). In *Morando* (1584), Greene also mentions Echo as one of the maids attending on Venus and belonging to the court of Cupid with other famous figures of carnal desire such as Salmacis and Circe. See Bardelmann, *Eros and Music* 220-21.

between love and death and a further degradation of the more conventional speculative associations of the echo.

The echo is thus one of the most significant mirrors of vanity in the tragedy. The ethical degradation it undergoes underlines its fundamentally paradoxical nature: it is bodiless, yet has a voice; absent, yet present (*praesentia in absentia*); and one of the most potent images of life-in-death, or death-in-life, in the play.³⁷

To conclude, the soundscape of the tragedy is remarkably devoid of any images of harmony, as in addition to traditionally death-related music, all the conventional images of harmony reverse into images of lust, torture and death. It is one of the many paradoxes of the play that it should be so full of music, and yet so devoid of musicality. And this treatment of music certainly is a reminder that the art itself was central to the representation of vanity at the time. Webster truly untunes the spheres in this tragedy; so that the spectator is left with an idea of music that is not world harmony any longer, but, to borrow another of Gisèle Venet's phrases, "en dernier ressort (elle est) expérience existentielle de la discontinuité".³⁸

Claire BARDELMANN

Université de Perpignan

37. As well as the image of the lark in the cage: "*Bosola*. Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison" (4.2. 123-26).

³⁸ Venet, *Temps et vision tragique*, p. 217.