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Patientia Regina: Patience as Character from the Morality Play to Jacobean Tragedy

**The suffering of a patient man, though morally
admirable, is not the stuff of drama.**

Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (70)

Literary character and ethical abstraction will generate each other. Character, as an amalgam of personality traits, implies a whole human being, say Macbeth. Ethical abstraction, say Ambition, is a reduction and disambiguation of human behavior. As readers and writers we are generally dissatisfied with abstraction *per se*—and bored with unaugmented naturalistic behavior. John Donne, for example, disdains that love which is a disembodied General:

But since my soule, whose child love is,
Takes limmes of flesh, and else could nothing doe,
More subtile than the parent is,
Love must not be, but take a body too.

(“Air and Angels” 7–10)

Ideas will find no rest in his imagination; virtue without human form is pretense. Yet, how often the creative imagination channels the disparate facets of a character’s behavior into a single category—as when Orlando and Jaques (in *As You Like It* 3.2) dub each other Signior Love and Monsieur Melancholy.

The virtue of patience, like Donne’s love, will have a human face, must “take a body too.” Patience assumes many bodies from the early Christian era to the Renaissance. Gerald Schiffhorst, for example, has provided an impressive inventory of the literature of patience in the Renaissance; my own work has described the insistently paradoxical nature of the virtue from its earliest Christian representations.

In early secular drama, characters step into (and out of) this virtue. My concern in this paper is these characters of patience and patient characters,

that is, the personality of patience, especially as it is dramatized. My discussion follows a continuum of representation—from allegorical personification to a *dianoia* of character (from which an interpretation of “patience” is abstracted). The discussion moves from the near transparency of morality play personification to the complex screens of representation in Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*; a brief (and speculative) conclusion considers the issue of gender and the paradox of dramatic patience.

* * *

“Character” has meant many things; the English word we use derives from the Greek for “impression,” that which an engraver or one minting coin leaves upon a blank surface. Aristotle, however, did not use this word to describe the likes of Oedipus. For him, the *prattontes*, or “actants,” of tragedy were composed of two parts: *ēthos* and *dianoia*. Translations of these two words have made Aristotle seem unnecessarily confusing. *Ēthos* is generally translated as “character”—I think incorrectly. An *ēthos* is, rather, a disposition, the center of will. *Dianoia*, usually translated as “thought,” is really the progressive reasoning of a *pratton*. One could say that *ēthos* is abstracted from the unfolding *dianoia*. Dramatic character, for Aristotle, is being and becoming, abstraction and progression.

By distinguishing these two aspects of what we have come to call “character,” Aristotle is calling attention to the fact that no *dramatis persona* will represent an idea in absoluteness; even the most blatantly allegorical character will, of necessity, fall short of abstraction. Rather, one may understand the ideational dimension of any character, any literary projection of humanity, as a continuum—one which extends from pure abstraction to the concrete complexity of an individual personality. The beings of fiction never quite touch either extreme. Even in his generality, Everyman is particular as a character; and even Hamlet, in his complex individuality (perhaps because of it), steps into the role of Mankind.

It may be this same polarity that Sidney has in mind as he places “Poesie” midway between general philosophy and specific history. And Dryden, looking back over the wealth of seventeenth-century drama, seems to consider a similar balance:

A character, or that which distinguishes one man from all others, cannot be supposed to consist of one particular virtue, or vice, or passion only; but 'tis a composition of qualities which are not contrary to one another in the same person; . . . yet it is still to be observed, that one virtue, vice,

and passion, ought to be shown in every man, as predominant over all the rest. (135)

For Sidney and Dryden, and their great forebear Aristotle, defining character is not a choice between idea or form, but rather a conjunction of the two, a dynamic proportion of meaning and person. For Sidney, the shaping of character is the poet's attempt to give form to the Platonic idea:

Go to man . . . and know whether she [nature] have brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes, so constant a friend as Pylades, so valiant a man as Orlando, so right a prince as Xenophon's Cyrus, so excellent a man in every way as Virgil's Aeneas. Neither let this be jestingly conceived, because the works of the one be essential, the other in imitation or fiction; for any understanding knoweth the skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he hath imagined them. Which delivering forth also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air; but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses. (24)

Character is therefore a concept perceived in its human form. This is not to say that Sidney, or his intellectual community, were unwilling or unable to distinguish between Spenser's Una and Shakespeare's Portia; but Sidney's "understanding" must be distinguished from a modern sense of "character"—the post-Romantic tendency to measure a "successful" character primarily in terms of psychological representation.

When Keir Elam sums up the modern version of this controversy he is distinguishing the structuralist from the idealist readings of character; but the same distinction between meaning and person pertains:

An actantial account of the drama is concerned with the individual character only in so far as he embodies one or more action functions. Such an approach, quite evidently, is at the opposite pole from the post-Romantic 'psychologistic' view of character, still current in literary criticism, which sees the *dramatis persona* as a more or less complex and unified network of psychological and social traits; that is, as a distinct 'personality' rather than as a function of dramatic structure.

The question arises as to whether a choice between these two extremes—one reductively mechanistic and the other naively idealistic—is inescapable in dealing with the individuals of dramatic worlds. (131)

Not only is there a modern tendency to consider character as either thematic or mimetic, but also an attempt to distinguish the embryonic from the mature. Ulrich Weisstein describes the "character type" as if it exists as a stage of development, a kind of rung on the Eriksonian ladder toward maturity: "Since types are, in a manner of speaking, characters in the formative stage, one may regard them as thematic modes which have not yet developed a valid symbolic prototype" (141).

Simplistic dichotomies between meaning and mimesis, when imposed upon a dramatist like Shakespeare, produce the most astounding divergences of opinion. Shakespeare's "greatness" as a creator of character has been described by Scholes and Kellogg as "his ability to fill the mold of type with individuality" (229); while Honor Matthews would argue that "however deep Shakespeare's psychological insight, the form of his plays appears to be determined less by individual characterization than by typological significance" (172). The confrontation of these two statements reveals not so much the deficiency of one view or the other, as it does the inadequacies of evaluating the success of a character based on this either/or premise.

* * *

Allegorical personification, the thing itself, is the first dramatic vehicle for patience. The continuities from medieval religious drama to renaissance secular drama have been described and argued since the beginning of modern criticism; the fruition of this discussion is Bernard Spivack's *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (1958)—and its most recent and intelligent expression is in *The Origins of Shakespeare* by Emrys Jones. The argument is really not *whether* medieval drama was influential (that would be hard to deny), but to what extent these theatrical events could have affected the art of Marlowe, Shakespeare, or Webster. As allegorical drama continues into the public theatres of London it represents a kind of reminiscence; it reflects a nostalgia for an age of uncluttered ethics. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a fine example of this tension between a past simplicity (in the form of good and bad angels) and a present complexity (bodied forth in the psychic struggles of the hero). But the historical overlap between didactic and representational tendencies in the drama must be kept in mind. From the fourteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth,

allegorical drama thrived in Europe. As entertainment, the English "morality," the French "mystère" and the Spanish "auto" reconciled pleasure and virtue (to borrow a title from Ben Jonson).

In at least two of the extant allegorical dramas of the late Middle Ages, Patience appears "in person." In the elaborate morality play entitled *The Castle of Perseverance* (ca. 1410), she engages in a verbal duel with Ira, who, (like the Ira of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*) insults Patientia with the aim of disarming the virtue by means of contagious wrath. She calls Patientia a "bicche blak as kole" (ed. Bevington, l. 2116), "fowle skowte" (2117) [foul wench], not to mention "motyhole" (2119) [dusty hole, slut]. As Patientia responds, she involves herself in a typical Christian paradox. She announces that she will "schende" [destroy] Wrath by the example of Christ on the cross. The aggressive verb aligned with the passivity of Christ crucified coalesce in a rhetoric of active inaction. As she literally looks down upon her adversary, with the roses of sanctity as her only weapon, her conclusion is

Therefor, boy, with thy boistous blad,
 Fare away by feldys ferne!
 For I wil do as Jhesu bad:
 Wrecchys fro my wonys werne
 With a dingne defens.
 If thou fonde to comyn alofte,
 I schal thee cacche fro this crofte
 With these rosys swete and softe,
 Peynted with Paciens.

(2138-46)

[Therefore, boy, with your fierce blade,
 Go off to the far off fields
 For I will do as Jesus bade:
 Ward off wretches from my dwelling
 In worthy defence.
 If you try to come up here
 I'll push you from this fenced plot
 With these roses sweet and soft,
 Painted with Patience.]

Later in the play Paciens, along with her sister virtues, attempts to save Mankind from Covetousness (2570-82). Although she does not have a "starring" role in the drama, she is always second in command (Humility leads the ranks—the last shall be first).

In the French Biblical pageant of the early sixteenth century, *La Pacience de Job*, which announces itself as a mixture of “histoire” and “exemplaire,” there is a moment in which Job’s salvation is allegorized. Patience, Faith, and Hope arrive to encourage Job at the end of the play. (Significantly, it would seem that Patience has temporarily displaced Love as the greatest of the theological virtues.) She is certainly the leader of her companion virtues, speaking first, and with the most to say (ed. Meiller, 11. 6084–99, 6124–59, 6413–44). As she prays to God she identifies herself as an emanation of Job: “Il [Job] m’a fait plaisir et service/ Et de pacience l’office” (6148–49). She is the speaker at the climactic defeat of Satan and restoration of the hero. As the virtues lead Job into his house, Patience explains the moral of the play, and identifies herself as its center: “Je suis Pacience nommée,/ Sur toutes vertus coronnée” (6414–15).

Dramatic personification is a kind of pleonasm; for, to personify is to put on the mask, the Latin “persona.” Drama does not simply use personification (say, as a species of rhetoric)—in a radical sense it *is* personification. Dramatic allegory is abstraction in person. It presents an actor standing for a character standing for a meaning. In the case of personified Patience, the “meaning” works against drama itself. Indeed, personified Patience is the most problematic of “characters” to the dramatist (whose craft depends upon enactment); the enactment of patience is paradoxically the presence of significant inaction. True Patience is the moment when drama becomes emblem.

* * *

In the fourteenth century, the legend of Griselda established the *locus communis* of the patient character. The final tale of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* has established an irremovable epithet for its curious heroine; she remains “patient” Griselda. The name itself has come to mean patience. By the sixteenth century, when Shakespeare’s Petruchio boasts to father Baptista that the unruly Katherina will “prove a second Grissel” (*Taming of the Shrew*, 2.1.295) the patience of Griselda had already entered the realm of commonplace. Two centuries had elapsed since the first literary appearance of a character named Griselda in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

Scholars have not been content to call Griselda Boccaccio’s own; and so, many have attempted to attribute the tale to a hidden cultural heritage. Some have seen a reflection of her in the ancient Sanskrit drama *Sakuntala* (Gubernatis, Laserstein); and she has been linked with the solar myth of Cupid and Psyche by Griffith. Patrucco, a historian, has tried to show

evidence of an actual thirteenth-century marriage which Boccaccio supposedly used as the basis of his fiction. The most convincing arguments in recent years have postulated folklore analogies. Bettridge and Utley compare the tale with Greek stories categorized as the "Patience of a Princess" type. But when all is said and done, Boccaccio's source or sources cannot be drawn with any exactitude.

His reason for using the tale as he did is more pertinent to this discussion. Boccaccio's Dioneo tells the story as the tenth of the tenth day; it is, therefore, not only the last story told, it is the completion of the work, the one hundredth tale. Unlike the linear movement of Dante's *Commedia* in which the one hundredth canto brings us to the beatific vision, Boccaccio's finale could not have been anticipated by his reader. If there is any design in the *Decameron* it is to defeat such linear progression in order to demonstrate the chameleon variety of human experience; but even so, Boccaccio's tale of patient Griselda suggests the "sense of an ending." Marga Cottina-Jones has argued that Griselda's concluding apotheosis represents a "liaison between reality and myth" (52). But, certainly a wonderful marbling of triumphant exultation and irony is also there. Although elsewhere in the work Boccaccio has presented examples of noble endurance, nowhere has an example been extended to such extremity, one might say to such absurdity. It is, I think, a purposeful absurdity; for, Griselda's patience is truly not of this world. The tale ends with two questions:

Che si potrà dir qui, se non che anche nelle povere case pio-
vono dal cielo de' divini spiriti, come nelle reali di quegli che
sarien piú degni di guardar porci che d'aver sopra uomini
signoria? Chi avrebbe, altri che Griselda, potuto col viso non
solamente asciutto ma lieto, sofferire le rigide e mai piú non
udite prove da Gualtieri fatte. (690)

[What more can be said, except that even into humble homes
heavenly sparks descend, and that even in splendid resi-
dences there are those who would do better to tend to pigs
than pretend to govern men? Who, except Griselda, could
have suffered (with a face not only tearless but calm) the
cruel and outrageous tests of Walter?]

It is as if the work were moving to the edge of its autotelic tendency—where entertainment threatens to become didactic, where the tangible is approaching an abstraction. That abstraction is the barely comprehensible patience of Griselda. Her patience is not realistic; it is not really logical. But it is a pure patience, a meaningful one. After the brutality of Gualtieri, the *Decameron* ends with an unearthly patience rewarded. In a strange way

Griselda's story is analogous to the frame story of the ten storytellers. Under the tyranny of a monstrously cruel and irrational plague they have retreated to the countryside; like Griselda facing her husband, their strength must come from within. It is not so much that the Griselda story sums up Boccaccio's sense of values; rather, the tale indicates that those values when communicated didactically (abstractly) will not seem as real as the storyteller. Griselda's tale is as much an aesthetic comment as an ethical one. The uncanny quality of her as a character arises from the way she partakes of the allegorical and the mimetic without distinction.

Perhaps it is this strategic positioning of the tale which made it so influential among the learned and the lay. Petrarch in a prose paraphrase, and Chaucer in his *Clerk's Tale*, are the most notable literary heirs. But an impressive number of folktale versions also exist; according to the findings of Bettridge and Utley, there are "three from Iceland, three from Norway, five from Swedish Finland, seven from Denmark, seven from Germany, six from Finland, seven from Denmark, seven from Germany, six from Finland proper, five from Lithuania, four from Czechoslovakia, one from Croatia, one from Ireland, and a Spanish version from Puerto Rico" (154). They all derive, in one way or another, from Boccaccio.

For centuries the story was recast in prose, poetry, and in ballad form for singing. It was also dramatized. As early as 1395 *Le Mystère de Griseldis* presented the story on stage in France (Golenistcheff-Koutou-zoff). John Phillip wrote the first such drama in English (ca. 1560) which he calls the "Commodye of pacient and meeke Grissell." Dekker, collaborating with Chettle and Haughton, also produced a rendition of the story in *Patient Grissil* of 1599. The subplot involving Griselda's alter-ego, an impatient shrew, makes the tale more "dramatic"; as a consequence of this elaboration, Dekker's concern seems to be less with the idea of patience than with the proprieties of womanhood.

But the earlier work, Phillip's, is an interesting hybrid of morality play and domestic melodrama. For example, when Grissell returns to her father's house near the end of the play she first counsels him to be patient:

Imbrace Pacience, let go rashe timertie:

Blame not Fortune for my overthroe,

It was the will of God that it should be so:

And what creature living, can withstand his providence,

This Crosse is to trye us, as hee doth his elect,

Therefore good father, arme your self with Pacience:

Let not murmuration your hart infect.

But blesse mee *Iehova* which his doth derect,

Then will hee protect us, from daunger and harme,
Therefore with Pacience, our selves let us arme.

(1766-75)

Moments after this, the virtue becomes real, appearing on stage before Griselda and Janiculus, to say:

I represent a vertue called Pacience,
Very meete and neadfull for such as suffer affliction,
I comfourt the mind tossed with inconvenience,
And in struckt them humblye to suffer punission,
I teach them paciently to duer correction,
So that in trouble I am a safe preservation,
Meete for all those that byde vexacion.

(1787-93)

The person and the abstraction quite literally share the stage in the Philip play.

* * *

For the sixteenth century, to be a Griselda was to be a wisely passive woman confronting the intractable tyranny of a man. The political arena unhappily provided at least one apt analog. When George Cavendish, in his *Life of Wolsey*, meditates on the patience of Henry's Catherine of Aragon, that nearly contemporary queen becomes a Griselda—Henry by implication becomes the Monster Bridegroom:

Queen Catherine . . . took and accepted all things in good part and with wisdom and great patience dissimuled the same, having Mistress Anne in more estimation for the King's sake than she had before; declaring herself thereby to be a perfect Griseld, as her patient acts shall hereafter more evidently to all men be declared. (38)

Catherine exists in time, not in an exemplary tale. Mistress Anne will not turn out to be her daughter; Henry will not welcome her back with open arms. Cavendish's comparison speaks ultimately of difference, of patience unrewarded. In the real world there is no apotheosis, no happy ending to the story of patient suffering.

That same Queen figures prominently in Shakespeare's historical romance, *Henry VIII*. Morality plays were undoubtedly a part of Shakespeare's youth, and unquestionably a foundation of his art; but he rarely reenacts this kind of dramatic allegory (the Rumour prologue of *2 Henry IV* is the most striking exception). And yet, at the very end of his career,

he chooses to give "Patience" a local habitation in an episode which at times comes very close to the spirit of the morality play. Patience is a kind of character/emblem at the end of *Henry VIII*: as the dying Katherine makes her final appearance, she enters "led between Griffith, her Gentleman Usher, and Patience, her woman" (4.2.sd). As a character, Patience makes her one and only appearance at this significant point in the Queen's spiritual progress. In a truly wonderful blend of allegory and historical realism, Katherine addresses her attendants as she is about to resign herself to sleep:

Katherine. Patience, be near me still, and set me lower;
 I have not long to trouble thee. Good Griffith,
 Cause the musicians play me that sad note
 I nam'd my knell, whilst I sit meditating
 On that celestial harmony I go to.

Sad and solemn music.

Griffith. She is asleep. Good wench, let's sit down quiet
 For fear we wake her; softly gentle Patience.

(4.2.76-82)

As she sleeps, a vision of that celestial harmony comes to Katherine; six "personages" in white and gold offer her garlands of heavenly reward. She awakens to the reality of the King's messenger; to him she delivers a letter of forgiveness—for which Patience herself had been the scribe (4.2.127). The queen's very last words are spoken to the "good wench" Patience; as she leaves the stage (and the great stage of this world), her plaintive notes recall many other tragic figures of patience:

Nay Patience,
 You must not leave me yet. I must to bed,
 Call in more women. When I am dead, good wench,
 Let me be us'd with honour; strew me over
 With maiden flowers, that all the world may know
 I was a chaste wife to my grave: embalm me,
 Then lay me forth; although unqueen'd, yet like
 A queen, and daughter to a king inter me.
 I can no more.

Exeunt leading Katherine.

(4.2.165-72)

That "good wench" Patience is literally and figuratively a prop to the self-fashioning Katherine. Like Richard II, Henry's queen delivers a poetically

charged version of her own demise. Unlike the unkinged Lear, the unqueened Katherine need not crawl toward death; with Patience at her side, this monarch has a clear vision of the good that comes from suffering—self-understanding. These final words are surely a version of soliloquy, with a dimension of the queens's soul (Patience) reified on stage. (Shakespeare achieves the same effect when Macbeth calls out to the homonymic Seyton [Satan] (cf. Kökeritz 173–74) four times at the very nadir of his despair (*Macbeth* 5.3)). In the figurative language of drama what can be more real than a proper name?

* * *

John Webster's heroine is not the Patientia of morality plays; she is hardly the "patient duchess" of an exemplary tale; and although she has an historical referent, the playwright certainly chose her story as a story—not for its documentary worth. Webster's tragedy displays the collision between action and patience, between plot and character. The Duchess simultaneously represents the depths of human vulnerability and an ideal inner transcendence. As a character she is unwillingly abstracted from her own humanity. She dies out of her anger, into the *ethos* of patience.

Webster's heroine has no proper name. She is "the duchess"; she is "a prince"; she is sister, mother, wife. This is not to say that she is indistinguishable from a given political or familial role—quite the contrary. Webster has given her a tonal range from playful seductress to dying innocent. And although Webster has delineated the strengths and passions of his heroine with care, he has left her nameless. That (perhaps negligible) absence prepares the way for a tendency in Webster's play that I will call "ecphrasis." Ecphrasis in Greek is a description of a work of art; in its attempt to overlay plastic representation with language, ecphrastic discourse confers a rather lengthy "name" through a rhetorical process. What I mean by ecphrasis in the case of Webster's Duchess is the way she is described *as if she were* a work of art. It is this dimension of the play's figurative language which prepares us for the monumentality of her death scene. Ecphrasis stops action; it momentarily transforms dramatic character into the stage equivalent of statuary.

Before her first appearance, Antonio describes his future wife in such an encomium that his friend Delio is prompted to exclaim, "You play the wire-drawer with her commendations" (1.1.206). Antonio responds, "I'll case the picture up" (207). But soon after, in the playful wooing scene of the first act, in which the Duchess persuades Antonio to marry her, it is this very statuesque quality she dismisses:

This is flesh, and blood, sir;
 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
 Kneels at my husband's tomb.

(1.1.453-55)

The irony here is harshly proleptic. For, as she kneels before her executioner in the fourth act, in her belief that her second husband is dead, she becomes the very statue she had earlier, and so easily, dismissed.

She is constantly fearful of becoming a dead object of worship. At the moment when the secret marriage is discovered by her half-crazed brother, she pleads with him, disdainful of being "cas'd up, like a holy relic" (3.2.138). But even as the fourth act begins, she is becoming the very embodiment of patience. Bosola's description of the imprisoned Duchess is a set piece bordering on personification:

Ferdinand. How doth our sister duchess bear herself
 In her imprisonment?

Bosola. Nobly; I'll describe her:
 She's sad, as one long us'd to't; and she seems
 Rather to welcome the end of misery
 Than shun it:—a behaviour so noble
 As gives a majesty to adversity;
 You may discern the shape of loveliness
 More perfect in her tears, than in her smiles;
 She will muse four hours together, and her silence
 Methinks, expresseth more than if she spake.

(4.1.1-10)

In Bosola's imagination she becomes a rare object of contemplation, Majesty in Adversity. Ferdinand, disturbed by the description of his sister, determines that he "will no longer study in the book/ Of another's heart" (4.1.16-17); ironically, in his madness in the fifth act, Ferdinand claims to be studying the "Art of Patience" (5.2.45).

As the fourth act proceeds, the Duchess asks a very Lear-like question to her faithful servant:

I am acquainted with sad misery,
 As the tann'd galley-slave is with her oar;
 Necessity makes me suffer constantly,
 And custom makes it easy—who do I look like now?

(4.2.27-30)

The frightened response of Cariola is also a realization that her mistress has exceeded the human form, as art does:

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.

(4.2.31–34)

Like the response of the Fool ("Lear's shadow"), Cariola's description of the Duchess serves to displace one state of being with another; the Duchess is changing from flesh and blood into a "picture." In an eerily pertinent detail of the final act, the Cardinal advises Bosola that to discover the whereabouts of Antonio he should "go to th' picture-makers and learn/ Who bought her picture lately" (5.2.141–42).

The ultimate dramatic ephrasis occurs as the stage becomes a frame for the heroine's patience. That moment is her torment by the madmen in the second scene of the fourth act. Ferdinand creates a perverse "masque" to torture his sister. Rather than a play within a play, one might understand this performance as a play on top of a play. The hypertheatrical Ferdinand is a playwright whose tragedy pits Moral Confusion against Natural Love; he suggests that his work is "Despair" (4.1.115). In the previous *Grand Guignol* of the waxwork figures, he had rejoiced that the Duchess was "plagued in art" (4.1.111).

But, in fact, the Duchess is the stronger artist; this picture of torment becomes her self-portrait. Before the madmen enter, it is the Duchess who seems to control Ferdinand's "play":

Sit Cariola: let them loose when you please,
For I am chain'd to endure all your tyranny.

(4.2.59–60)

If the Duchess means that her brothers have literally chained her, forced her to such submission, she also means that an inner strength restrains her from losing herself in mad despair. She chains herself as protection. In an earlier scene, as her tragic course begins, she had assumed a similar stance: "But come: whither you please. I am arm'd 'gainst misery" (3.5.141). Arming is now chaining. The stage picture embodies the paradox of Patience—victim as victor.

An engraving of Peter Brueghel (cf. Lebeer), dated 1557, part of a series of engravings depicting the vices and virtues, depicts Patientia as the nexus between the two moral poles (plate 1). She is seated at lower center on a



PATIENTIA EST MALORVM QVÆ AVT INFERVNTVR AVT ACCIDVNT, CVM ÆQVANIMITATE PERLATIO

PLATE 1. *PATIENTIA*. Engraving by Peter Bruegel the Elder.
Reprinted, by permission, from *Graphic Worlds of Peter Bruegel the Elder*, ed. H.
Arthur Klein (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), plate 47.

solid block, clutching a cross, looking beyond the madness—far beyond the plate. Her little corner of devotion is so easily missed on a first viewing. She is proportionally overwhelmed by the madness she must transcend. Very typical of Brueghel and Bosch, a nightmare landscape in which the human form is distorted almost beyond recognition, prevails. In this particular scheme, Brueghel seems to have added a religious satire; the visual center of the allegory is a gigantic Cardinal/egg who is mysteriously, comically, attacked with a knife. As the eye moves from this bizarre center a veritable panoply of vice is next evident.

The similarities between Brueghel's engraving of Patientia and Webster's stage picture of the suffering Duchess are striking. Whether or not Webster had seen Brueghel's engraving is barely relevant. And, to suggest that Webster had *not* seen the engraving would be more provocative than to suggest, or attempt to prove, a genetic relationship. The chaining of Patientia is a very common attribute of the virtue (Sandona, *passim*); perhaps the Duchess speaks only figuratively about being chained, but after all, she is in prison. The Brueghel landscape is one of a world gone mad, abounding in exaggerations of lust and intrigue. Brueghel's huge Cardinal/egg stands eerily in the background, riding the back of an unidentified man (a brother of sorts); the Duchess's other brother (the Cardinal) is, indeed, the background to her torture. Brueghel's tiny, overwhelmed, personification sits *chained* to a block of constancy, clutching a *crucifix*, ready to endure all the tyranny her world inflicts. Bosola's song is an apt description of Brueghel's Patientia:

Strew your hair with powders sweet,
 Don clean linen, bathe your feet,
 And (the foul fiend more to check)
 A crucifix let bless your neck.

(4.2.190-93)

Is there a version of Bosola himself (to the right of the tree, peering over the edge of the shore), that frog-like "common bellman" (4.2.173)?

* * *

The death of the Duchess of Malfi is the center of Webster's tragedy. Although some have made elaborate cases for her "guilt," her torture and execution seem designed to intensify a sense of the intractability of innocent suffering. The only justice of the fourth act is the justice of a madman—who is twin brother to the saint.

The integrity of Webster's tragedy of the Duchess often has been questioned; the baroquely extended fifth act has been admired only rarely. After

the dramatic and ethical highpoint with which the fourth act ends (the Duchess's suffering and death), the fifth act has either seemed dramatically inept or morally verbose. I would like to suggest that the structure of Webster's tragedy is very much a part of his meaning. The Duchess speaks more truth than she knows, when in the first act, she says: "time will easily/ Scatter the tempest" (1.1.471-72). The death of the Duchess is like an island which suddenly emerges from a rushing stream, establishing a moral confrontation between action and patience—and an aesthetic confrontation between dramatic agency and ethical emblem.

Angus Fletcher, in an attempt to define the nature of ethical personification, offers this intriguing analogy:

It may help, in the case of moral allegory, to think of each virtue, acquired or lacking, as a kind of moral energy, not, as Aristotle's *Ethics* would define virtue, a state of being, but an equivalent in the moral world of a tuned-up muscle in the physical world. (47)

He states the same point more emphatically later in the work:

I have insisted that virtue, the positive ideal of allegory, needs to be given its original sense of "power," and moral fables need then to do with polarities of strength and weakness, confidence and fear, certainty and doubt, rather than with some ideal constellation of Christian graces and fallen states. (295)

Given this perspective, Christian Patientia as an agent of allegory is in a peculiar spot. Like Christianity, its ultimate meaning is not "of this world." It (most often "she") is then like a "tuned-up muscle" which may never respond in reflex; its "power" is in its very ability to cede to earthly power. Christian Patience as an element of allegorical meaning is an agent whose aesthetic and ethical tendency is to revert to being an icon—an action which would rather be an image.

The Duchess moves steadily (at times unwillingly) into the role of Patience; as she does, she moves steadily out of the dramatic action. It may seem odd to distinguish "the play" from one of its characters; but Webster suggests just such a distinction when his Duchess finds herself an unwilling actor in the universe of his stage:

I account this world a tedious theatre,
For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will.

(4.1.83-84)

She is a woman who loves life; yet the role thrust upon her is of patient martyrdom. Bosola finds himself in an equally uncomfortable antagonism with the theatre of his life; Ferdinand describes his henchman as a good actor who plays the role of the villain (4.1.88-90); Bosola finally defends himself by saying that he was an "actor" against his nature (5.5.85-86).

The Duchess never accepts the role of martyr. Even when Antonio counsels patience, she resists: "Must I, like to a slave-born Russian,/ Account it praise to suffer tyranny?" (3.5.76-77). After the horrid waxworks display, her vulnerability becomes most evident. She verges on despair, as Bosola takes the unlikely (but paradoxically appropriate) role of consoler:

Bosola. O fie! despair? remember
You are a Christian.

Duchess. The church enjoins fasting:
I'll starve myself to death.

Bosola. Leave this vain sorrow:
Things being at the worst begin to mend;
The bee when he hath shot his sting into your hand
May then play with your eyelid.

Duchess. Good comfortable fellow
Persuade a wretch that's broke upon the wheel
To have all his bones new set; entreat him live
To be executed again:—who must despatch me?

(4.1.76-82)

At arguably her most desperate moment, the Duchess curses the stars in language that reveals not only a disgust with her own incipient martyrdom but also her realization that she is very near that state: "Let heaven, a little while, cease crowning martyrs,/ To punish them [the stars]!" (4.1.107-8). Her refusal to be canonized makes the Duchess so singularly appealing among the victims of intractable Fortune.

Unlike the dilemma of Bosola (her executioner), her role is a continuation of character not an inversion of it. At the moment of her death she is the counterpoise to all of the actions of the "tedious theatre" around her. Her character becomes the equipollent opposite of dramatic action, and consequently of human action in general. In the justly famous line "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.142) Webster gives us the lexical equivalent of her final status in the play. Three possibilities for the word "still" are "even so," "calm," and "in perpetuity." She is Duchess in spite of the world, and in a calm eternity. The play continues as it does in order to make this apparent by contrast.

Webster's tragedy would be indeed tedious if the Duchess were nothing more than a resigned victim from the beginning to her end. But, very much to the contrary, the playwright creates a kind of symphonic arrangement in which her passionate personality as wife and mother is coordinate with, and ultimately subsumed in, a progressive abstraction. She acquires her final role as *Patience* because of that humanity, not in spite of it. As she is about to be strangled she reminds her servant to give cough syrup to her child; she is *Duchess of Malfi* still.

Just as the Duchess is patient against her nature, so the increasing passivity of her character opposes itself to the dramatic action. Her ethical resistance to the actions of her brothers is comparable to an aesthetic resistance to the fact of drama. Webster's decision to remove her from the tragedy in the fourth act is like her own decision not to participate in the dark actions of her world.

Another means of explaining this abrupt removal of a central character from the dramatic action would be to cite Northrop Frye's intriguing discussion of the Bible's narrative and its relation to human history:

The narrative framework of the Bible is a part of its emphasis on the shape of history and the specific collision with temporal movement that its revelation is assumed to make. In a sense, therefore, the deliverance of Job is a deliverance from his own story, the movement in time that is transcended when we have no further need of time. Much the same would be true of the relation of Jesus to the Passion narrative, which is the kernel of the Gospels. (198)

While the Duchess does not triumph over "temporal movement" in the same way Job and Jesus do, as a narrative "code" the same sort of dynamic between suffering and transcendence pertains.

Action is the ethical and dramatic background to her patience. As the play begins, Webster repeatedly presents the idea of "action." Antonio, contemplating the "foul melancholy" which seems to be brooding in *Bosola*, offers this explanation:

If too immoderate sleep be truly said
To be an inward rust unto the soul,
It then doth follow want of action
Breeds all black malcontents, and their close rearing,
Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing.

(1.1.78-83)

The passage ironically adumbrates the final act; the cure for melancholy which Antonio proposes is the source of most of the slaughter as the play ends. Want of action is certainly not the problem. Not too much later in that first scene, high-minded Antonio expresses the rather naive opinion that brave horsemanship may "raise the mind to noble action" (1.1.145). Antonio is a Renaissance optimist for whom action is morally neutral; the mind has the capability to raise itself, by practice, into "noble action."

But, when Ferdinand first appears, fresh from the joust, he asks "When shall we leave this sportive action, and fall to action indeed?" (1.1.91). His simple question (which assumes this simple distinction between play and earnest) is answered stridently in the fifth act. All our actions are sportive, whether we know it or not. Bosola, as he mistakenly wounds Antonio, announces that "we are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded/ Which way please them" (5.4.54-55); Antonio concurs:

In all our quest of greatness,
Like wanton boys whose pastime is their care,
We follow after bubbles, blown in th' air.

(5.4.64-66)

Although these are some of the last words in the play concerning human action, the middle of the play provides an antidote to the bleak despair of these dying men. Only the Duchess had understood that the sportiveness of human action may have a transcendent meaning. In her exiled state she counsels Antonio:

I have seen my little boy oft scourge his top
And compar'd myself to't: naught made me e'er
Go right but heaven's scourge-stick.

(3.5.76-78)

God, like a little boy at play, guides human action (makes us go right) with his scourge-stick of suffering; the uncomfortable implication is that we may be as insensible to God's intentions as such tops are.

Like most of the verbal texture of this play, Ferdinand's seemingly inconsequential language in the first act becomes dreadfully pertinent as the play proceeds. His sportive question becomes a question in deed. Ferdinand soon warns against the Duchess's "darkest actions" (1.1.315); and she, wondering how to overcome this fraternal opposition, speaks of "almost impossible actions" (1.1.346). The word is there insistently, and the ethical problem is there in its germinal form. Is the noble action Antonio posits possible in this world, or are all actions, by their very nature, dark? Bosola explains the dark design of the last act as "a mist." And Delio had

warned early in the play that "they pass through whirlpools, and deep woes do shun,/ Who the event weigh, ere the action's done" (2.4.106-7).

The tragedy seems to be based on a supreme paradox. Humanity is action; yet righteousness may begin where action ends. Bosola's final endeavor is to seek revenge, to create a new play wherein human action and justice are allied. As he is about to execute the Cardinal, he proclaims "Thus it lightens into action:/ I am come to kill thee" (5.5.20)—as if it were so simple, as if "enlightened" action were the solution to injustice. Having just killed Antonio by mistake, Bosola should know that to act is quite literally a brave stab in the dark. Not to act is to be patient to the point of self-sacrifice. To act is to be Bosola; not to act is to be the Duchess.

* * *

My final consideration is Shakespeare's Cordelia, not because she represents the outer edge of what I have described as a continuum of representation in the patient character. But because she represents an extension of the conflict between ethics and action which I have described in Webster's tragedy. Cordelia has been allegorized in many ways; Danby, for example, describes Cordelia as Nature redeemed, as Virtue, as "the apex of Shakespeare's mind" (128) and as "singleness and integration" (133). And from the time of Coleridge her sentiments have been analyzed as alternately proud or simple-minded.

But what is most intriguing about Cordelia is that her absence and her silence are the very elements of "character" which have given her such significance. There are few characters in Shakespeare, who with so little stage presence, have incited as much critical discussion as Cordelia. It is so obvious that she is not a personification; nor does she reflect a complete person to be judged for ulterior motives—although her "character" may shimmer in and out of these roles. Like Solveig in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, she exists at the beginning and at the end of the play as if comprising the tragedy's ethical frame, as if representing a truth which exists behind the scenes, behind the screens of this world. Her reappearance and consequent death at the promised end of the play is both salvific and excruciating.

Put simply, perhaps simplistically, Lear *does*, Cordelia *is*. Her kinship (although somewhat distant) is with Griselda, not with Webster's Duchess. John Danby puts it somewhat starkly, but effectively: "Art, like ethical action, is utopian in intention" (126). Cordelia expresses the utopian intention of Shakespeare's art. The impatient Lear struggles against the backdrop of her absence; he rants within her silence.

In the final scene, Lear with a feather dares the universe to be meaningful. All attention is focused on Cordelia's mouth. Will she breathe? Will

she utter the truth which redeems nature? For Lear it is "a chance which does redeem all sorrows" (5.3.267). Lear strives to remember her voice, which "was ever soft, gentle, and low" (274). How appropriate that Lear dies looking on her lips. In the mystery of things an unheard utterance comes from Cordelia's lips. The final moments of the play are deeply emotive not because Lear is deluded into believing that Cordelia is physically revived, but because his journey to truth has been such a painful crawl toward death. Only by looking on the lips of the dead Cordelia, lips whose reticence instigated the fall of the mighty, only then could he understand the absent voice of his daughter—the paradoxical voice of silence, the paradoxical act of patience.

* * *

I have not been concerned, primarily, with the nature of sexualized and politicized patience in renaissance drama. Catherine Belsey has, of course, made such a case (cf. pp. 164–78). My investigation is primarily semiotic, not historicist. Patience, it seems, has a gender; and sexual opposition is an essential dimension of the semiotics of a patient character (in the Renaissance and elsewhere). Griselda is patient because she is a wife. Webster defines the tragedy of the Duchess by circumscribing her with the violence of brothers. And Lear, (as I have argued elsewhere) is impatient because he has dismissed a Daughter.

After the murder of the Duchess, Ferdinand berates Bosola for the deed, insisting that he and she were more than siblings—"twins," he maintains. This twinship (at least as it exists in the mind of the raging brother) recurs in the shadow of incest recently underscored by critics. Ferdinand's mind is distorted by a frustrated desire to share in his sister's identity; it is indeed an uncanny moment when he (soon to turn lycanthrope) imagines his nephews as wolf-cubs. Comparing his sister to a book, Ferdinand "reads" her; he comes to study the "art of patience"—even as he goes mad.

The world of the Duchess is a complement (sexually and ethically) of Lear's world. Like the Brueghel analog, she is surrounded by men who are either malicious, perverse, or ineffectual. It is as if Webster chooses to create an heroic "action" out of the stillness of Cordelia's death. Ferdinand's madness, while ominous, is thereby de-centered. Shakespeare's tragic center is an old father, Webster's a young sister.

To cite convention, and to say that by the time of Shakespeare and Webster, the sex of personified virtue was necessarily female, may answer one question, but begs another. Half an explanation comes when the exigencies of Latin grammar are brought to bear. But ultimately, we come to the

unanswerable question of why it should be that Western culture, for the most part, has established its ethical icons as female, and its ethical strife as male. Why Cordelia and the Duchess, why Lear and Ferdinand?

The power plays of sexuality cast shadows on our perception of the world; they are recurrently evident in our mythic landscapes. When Hesiod in his *Works and Days* imagines the Beginning, he describes Earth (*Gaia*) as a woman oppressed by Sky (*Ouranos*) a man. The male sky acts, the female sky is acted upon, and the result is the cosmos. But for Hesiod, as soon as "world" exists, this sexual distinction between action and submission dissipates. Out of the Mother springs the teeming activity of the Titans, one of whom, Kronos, prompted by the formerly passive Mother *Gaia*, castrates the Sky for his "outrages"—and so the world turns. Pure agent and pure patient exist before history, and outside the perceptual world. Existence as we know it (as Hesiod knew it) is a blurring of these sexual and ethical absolutes.

* * *

My introductory remarks posit a dynamic between meaning and representation in what we have come to call character. My conclusion reasserts this dichotomy with a difference. As idea relates to form, so patience to action, and female to male; and so a patient character relates to the impatience which is drama. Eleanor Prosser's pronouncement about the "patient man" having little to do with the "stuff of drama" serves well as an epigraph because it gently touches the edge of my assertions.

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