

Malcontented Agents: from the novellas to *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (c.1598) and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1613) are two plays in which Matteo Bandello's portrayal of evil agents in his novellas exert a constant, even if not immediately obvious, influence. Remote from each other chronologically and generically, Shakespeare's comedy and Webster's tragedy make common use of a distinctive character-type, which has an equivalent in the Bandello source: the melancholy, embittered, and vindictive outsider known at the time, as well as by modern critics, as the malcontent (Nigri, *The Origin of Malcontent*). Comparing how and to what purpose each dramatist duplicated, altered or expanded the figures he found in the source story provides an insight into his way of working and informs our understanding of the plays.

The main source for *Much Ado about Nothing* is Bandello's XXII novella, first published in Italian in 1554 and then translated into French by François de Belleforest. It is impossible to be certain from which version Shakespeare borrowed the plot, the setting (Messina), and some character names (Leonato and Don Pedro). Following Charles Prouty Geoffrey Bullough tentatively suggests that Shakespeare "was certainly acquainted with the work of Ariosto, Spenser, Bandello and Belleforest" (67; Prouty 1). Joaquim Anyó assumes instead that Shakespeare "more probably read the French version" (185).

As for *Much Ado*'s villains, they are usually regarded as Shakespeare's most significant deviation from his source, yet a closer investigation of Bandello's text reveals that this is not the case. The novella's insistence on slander and stories (re)told by different characters and used by the wrongdoer for his own purposes gives the comedy its interest in the power of counterfeited words as confirmed by the villains' general tendency to tell a story rather than enacting it (see Moisan). In the novella, telling, repeating, or inventing a tale is of

great importance: Girondo, Timbreo's rival lover and close friend, for example, knows of Fenicia's wedding because of "news spread through Messina" (114).<sup>1</sup> The account of Fenicia's infidelity – "What I'm now going to tell you will be very profitable for you to hear" (115) – provides the lens through which the deception scene must be interpreted by Timbreo, and the scene itself is more effective because it is addressed to an unaware victim, who

as the three passed before him he *heard* what the perfumed gallant was saying to the man with the ladder: 'See that you place the ladder so carefully to the window that you make *no noise*, for the last time we were here my lady Fenicia *told me* that you had leaned it there with *too much noise*. Do everything neatly and quietly' (117; my emphasis).

Girondo's repentance is triggered by reports "of the way in which Fenicia died" (123), and Timbreo, after his marriage to Lucilla-Fenicia, "to the immense pity and wonder of his hearers ... told the whole miserable tale" (129) of Fenicia's death, which is then retold – but this time explaining the real events – by Messer Lionato. Towards the end of the novella, the whole tale of the lovers' misadventure is repeated three more times: once by the bridegrooms to a friend and successively by this friend who reported the whole story first to the King and then to the Queen.

Clearly, the novella's stress on the sheer power of words to shape events fascinated Shakespeare. And indeed, despite Don John's claim that he is "not of many words" (I, 1, 150), the villains in Shakespeare dictate the dramatic action through a targeted use of deceiving language. The deception scene is initiated by hearsay, since Borachio reports what he has heard behind the arras; it is prepared through slander, a piece of false speaking, and it is unmasked through a confession (Borachio's accounts to Conrade). The world portrayed

here is one where language gains a perverse power when it does not adhere to reality.

Claudio's and Don Pedro's misinterpretation of Hero's unfaithfulness, for example, is made possible because their understanding of it relies on words, and words – as in the novella – falsify truth: “This grieved count / Did see her, hear her, at that hour last night” (IV, 1, 89-90). This process of falsification serves the dramatist's choice to place the deception scene off-stage since, again, words can be made to speak louder than action (see Moisan).

Even though Bandello and Shakespeare are particularly close in their emphasis on reporting and on the telling or retelling of a tale, it is usually claimed that there is no clear equivalent in Bandello of Don Pedro's villainous half-brother, Don John, the executor of the central lie, since Shakespeare rejects the love versus friendship theme between Timbreo, Fenicia, and Gironde. In Bandello's tale, it is Gironde who wants to destroy the match between his friend and the woman he loves, and it is he also who plans the stratagem of the ladder with the help of “a young courtier, a fellow of little upbringing, more pleased with evil than with good” (115). Such a deviation from the source, and there are others, does not negate the close similarity between Shakespeare's and Bandello's villains.

What one immediately notices in the source is an overabundance of villains involved in the plot. As well as Gironde, there is his “confidant and helper in his crime” (115) who warns Timbreo of Fenicia's supposed unfaithfulness, and Gironde's other two attendants: a “scented servant,” the man who plays the part of Fenicia's lover, and “another man with a ladder on his shoulder” (116). This excess of rogues in Bandello differs markedly from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, the other two possible sources of the play. In the former, Polynesso orchestrates his infamous plan alone: “But lest he might in this attempt be thwarted / To none at all his secret he imparted” (87).<sup>3</sup> Equally, Spenser's Philemon, who “disguised [himself] like that groome of base deegree, / Whom he had feigned th' abuser of [Phedon's] love to bee” (109), acts without the help of an accomplice.<sup>3</sup> The

presence of several rogues in Shakespeare's comedy is especially unnecessary in a play where the deception is not even shown on stage. Don John and Borachio, the authors of the lie, and Conrade, functional to the discovery of the trick, are therefore carried over from Bandello's novella and may be intended, as Claire McEachern states, "to dilute the sense of villainy so that it does not overwhelm the capacity of comedy to contain or forestall it" (19).

Most obviously, Shakespeare assigned different roles to his villains. Whereas in Bandello three of them are underlings directed by Gironde, in *Much Ado about Nothing* the malcontented Don John follows the instructions of his subaltern, Borachio, who consistently directs the plot and its participants.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Gironde and Borachio are virtually identical, and the contrition and sense of shame which they both ultimately experience reinforces their similarity. Nevertheless, Don John, although absent in the source as a character, significantly relates to the Bandellian text because he provides a vehicle for the social and economic concerns which are so pervasive in the novella. In the story of Timbreo and Fenicia, Bandello persistently stresses the characters' social status: Timbreo is greatly above Lionato in rank and Gironde's agents are clearly inferior to him.

In the same manner, in *Much Ado about Nothing* Borachio is induced to slander Hero for a thousand ducats<sup>5</sup> while Don John, whose actions have been commonly described by critics as unmotivated, is readily understood if one bears in mind contemporary ideas about the nature and behaviour of the bastard (Findlay). Similar to Edmund in *King Lear* and Spurio in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Don John's vindictiveness is presented as entirely the result of his illegitimacy (Nigri, *And I must now go wander*; McEachern 18). Clearly, in the analysis of his character the social category to which he belongs cannot be ignored, particularly in a play which begins with news of a rebellious brother who has been defeated in battle.

Although the details of his parentage become clear to the audience only in Act 4 (“John the Bastard,” 4.1), Don John’s hatred of his brother appears at the beginning of the play when he states: “I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace” (1, 3, 25-26). The revelation of his bastardy almost at the end of the play only clarifies what would have been received in the early modern period as self-evident: namely, that bastards are disorderly and discontented figures because their condition guarantees exclusion from all forms of social and political life. Illegitimacy was thought of as at once reflecting and causing the moral illegitimacy that the bastards’ behaviour and personality were programmed to exhibit.<sup>6</sup>

Thus Shakespeare, in changing the source’s love-motivation to a social one, not only emphasized an element already variously explored in the novella but he also introduced a character and subject frequently treated in the drama of his age by offering at the same time a possible connection between his discontented bastard and a renowned historical one. As Murray J. Levith notes, the name Don John and the setting (Messina) may have reminded Shakespeare of Don John of Austria, the illegitimate Catholic brother of Philip II of Spain (82), who sailed from Messina to lead the war against the Islamic Turks, culminating in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 (Paulson). Despite general thanksgiving for this military (and religious) victory, Don John was not well thought of in England, since he was associated with an attempt to restore the nation to Catholicism by means of a marriage with Mary Queen of Scots. Whether or not Shakespeare deliberately alludes to this historical bastard is impossible to establish, but the duplication of setting, of name, and of natal condition suggests that he wanted his audience to make the connection.<sup>7</sup> The result, after all, lays stress on Don John’s status as a bastard and offers an explanation to his sense of social alienation. Don John’s illegitimacy, the play’s surplus of discontented figures, and its interest in the distorting power

of words and stories demonstrate that *Much Ado about Nothing* is even more indebted to Bandello than is generally supposed.

Similar to *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Duchess of Malfi* confirms the importance of Bandello for early modern drama. The story of the protagonist is a real one: in 1490, at the age of twelve, Giovanna d'Aragona is married to Alfonso Piccolomini, Duke of Malfi, who dies after eight years and leaves her a widow. Still young and now regent of a dukedom, Giovanna falls in love with her husband-to-be, Antonio Bologna, the steward of her household. Their union, not surprisingly, is jeopardized by the strong disapproval of Giovanna's brothers, Lodovico and Carlo (the Cardinal and the renamed Ferdinand of Webster's tragedy), who force the lovers to seek refuge in different Italian cities before being captured and killed. As evidenced by the Corona manuscripts at the National Library in Naples, the story of the unfortunate Duchess was so popular in the south of Italy that Bandello unsurprisingly included it in his *Novelle*.

Webster might well have read the novella *Il signor Antonio Bologna sposa la duchessa di Amalfi e tutti due sono ammazzati* not only in the original Italian but also in Belleforest's French translation or in two more English translations: in Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567) and in Thomas Beard's *The Theatre of God's Judgements* (1597), in the section entitled *Of Whoredomes committed under colour of Marriage*. It is arguable that Webster possessed at least some knowledge of the Italian version since, in contrast to the more moralistic French and English translators, he shared Bandello's relatively sympathetic view of the Duchess (see also Boklund 39-40).

As Shakespeare constructed Don John, Webster created a malcontent figure by manipulating Bandello's story in order to create his version. Bosola's malcontented condition is undisputed from the very beginning of the play (I, 1, 73-81) and is taken to be his essential identity: "Be yourself: / Keep your old garb of melancholy" (I, 2, 201-2).<sup>8</sup> But in Act 4, the

play begins to suggest the presence of a different self, one which accepts the existence and the relevance of moral choices and the guiding power of conscience. The result produces a conflict of impulses: Bosola begins to feel pity for his victim (the Duchess), but simultaneously feels tied to her torturer (Ferdinand). He then takes shelter in a sequence of disguises unconvincingly designed to distance him from her murder – he is first “*like an old man*,” then “a tomb-maker,” and then “the common bellman” (IV, 2, 115, 147, 172). Ironically, it is through another role, that of revenger, that he pursues justice and gains access to a new, morally aware self. Despite the change, his revenge fails, since he kills Antonio, the only person he wanted to save, instead of Ferdinand. Yet in spite – or perhaps because – of this failure, Webster was able to dramatize the successful rejection of coercive social patterning in the formulation of the self so that Bosola’s final verdict on himself is not undercut by irony or pessimism: he is of “good nature, yet i’t’h’end / Neglected” (V, 5, 86-87).

We might wonder what prompted Webster to modify the characterization of the malcontent in *The Duchess* and in doing so, most puzzling, alter his dramatic function. The answer lies not with a belated attempt at clumsy moralism, nor with Webster’s supposed inconsistency and inability to create a coherent dramatic structure. What we are dealing with here is a deliberate use of sources, a use so far unnoticed, other than a brief mention by Wiggins (164).

Following Bandello, Painter portrays Daniel de Bozola as a Lombard captain and hired assassin who kills Antonio Bologna in Milan.<sup>9</sup> Before knowing the identity of this murderer, however, we are told of a Neapolitan gentleman who was first asked to kill the Duchess’ husband and, “having chaunged his minde, and differing from day to day to sorte the same to effect,” was substituted by the Aragonian brothers with a man “of larger [i.e. less

scrupulous] Conscience than the other, inveigled with Covetousnesse, and hired for ready Money” – namely, Bozola (Painter 42).<sup>10</sup>

Bosola’s hesitation and repentance seem to derive from Bandello’s description of this Neapolitan gentleman whose “Conscience” makes him reluctant to kill Antonio. It does not seem farfetched to assume that Webster saw that he could fuse the two historical figures (the Gentleman and Daniel de Bozola), and this imaginative fusion in turn induced him to intensify the restorative and life-enhancing impact of the Duchess on those around her because it is her responses to Bosola’s malcontent side which prompt the awakening of his conscience.

Webster’s revision of the novella can be read as an attempt to challenge the generic structures within which critical discussions usually confine his play. This is not, of course, a way of substituting the finale with a happy ending: figures such as Ferdinand and the Cardinal ensure that the play’s tragic destination is irreversible. But Bosola’s belated discovery, or recovery, of a moral self (assuming that we are expected to view this self as his true one) produces an interesting double effect: on the one hand, it sharpens the play’s tragic pessimism, since the would-be protector of virtue has not been able to save the virtuous heroine; on the other hand, it opposes that pessimism because the claims of conscience and common humanity are shown to run deeper than those of villainy and self-interest. From this perspective, Bosola’s closing speeches about the futility of life and the impossibility of moral order are refuted by his own example.

Webster’s reconfiguring of his malcontent indicates the moral questioning which this type of character raised upon the Jacobean stage. Indeed a similar questioning occurs with Shakespeare’s treatment of his bastard in *Much Ado*, which also challenges any too rigid definition of genre. Although he functions in a comedy, Don John fails to experience any awakening of conscience or moral growth of the kind which Bosola achieves or which



Edmund glimpses in *King Lear*. Our understanding of this discontented figure relies on the reports of his escape from Messina, his imprisonment, and the future “brave punishment” which awaits him (V, 4, 126). As a blocking agent, Don John represents the force which resists the goal of comedy (Frye) but, interestingly, Shakespeare does not show him renouncing this blocking role at the end of the play: he is never reunited with the characters against whom he has plotted, nor is he converted to take part in the final happy resolution which the genre would require. His anti-comic status – similar to the “notoriously abused” Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (V, 1, 371) – hardly diminishes in the final act and is contained in the disturbing words of the Messenger: “My lord, your brother John is ta’en in flight / And brought with armed men back to Messina” (V, 4, 123-24). While Bandello’s Gironde appears at the end of the story – and he even marries Fenicia’s sister, Belfiore – Don John’s non-appearance darkens the ending of Shakespeare’s play in its suggestion that the type of menace to the marriages which he represents persists as an element of social reality. The villain is silenced in the play but not fully ejected from it.

Shakespeare’s complex vision and his willingness to defy conventional ideas, including his challenges to the limitations imposed by generic boundaries, are more complicated – and disturbed – than Webster’s. In both cases, however, the source story steers the portrayal of characters which are increasingly trapped in an oppressively punitive world governed by a social, economic, and religious determinism. Don John’s and Bosola’s struggle against these conditions gives these characters a theatrical dynamism and energy which complicates our response to them: after all, simple condemnation of these discontented men who reject or invert all moral norms and social values may not be sustainable.

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<sup>1</sup> The English translations of Bandello’s novella are taken from Bullough 1968, pp. 112-134.

<sup>2</sup> *Orlando Furioso, Book V, translated by Sir John Harington* (1591), in Bullough 1968, pp. 82-105.

<sup>3</sup> *The Fairie Queene* by Edmund Spenser (1596), Book II, Canto IV, Stanza xxvii, in Bullough 1968, pp. 106-112. Alwin Thaler believes that the unmotivated villain in Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* is a prototype of Don John.

<sup>4</sup> "Sir Gironde now *conceived* the idea of sowing such discord between Timbreo and his betrothed ... *having found a man apt to serve his blind and frenzied appetite*, he diligently *instructed* him in his scheme. ... it seemed that *his* plan was succeeding extremely well. (...) the disloyal Gironde decked out like a gentleman one of his servants *whom he had already told what to do*, and he perfumed him with the sweetest of scents" (Bandello 114-16; my emphasis). Cf. *Much Ado's* II, 1, 145; II, 2, 3; II, 2, 19-23; II, 2, 30-46, 50-1; III, 3, 104-105. Borachio's self-conscious recognition of his own responsibility in the misdeed in III, 3, 150-152 ("chiefly by my villainy") and in V, 1, 232-234 ("The lady is dead upon mine and my master's false accusation; and briefly, I desire nothing but the reward of a villain") seems to be softened when he claims that "Don John your brother incensed me to slander the Lady Hero" (V, 1, 226-227).

<sup>5</sup> See also III, 3, 109-11.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Much Ado*, IV, 1, 189 and V, 1, 239.

<sup>7</sup> In Belleforest's translation, the word "bastard" recurs twice at the beginning of the tale on Timbreo de Cardone. Here the term refers to Manfred, the illegitimate son of Frederick II.

<sup>8</sup> Readers should note the interesting contradiction here: 'be yourself' suggests an identity which is essential and permanent, whereas 'garb' suggests an idea of identity as something that can be discarded and changed at will, like clothes.

<sup>9</sup> "This bloody beaste was called Daniel de Bozola that had charge of a certayne bande of footemen in Millan. Thys newe Iudas and pestilent manqueller, who wythin certayne dayes after knowinge that Bologna oftentimes Repayred to heare Service at the Church and convent of S. Fraunces, secretly conveyed himself in ambush, hard besides the church of S. Iames, (being accompanied wyth a certayne troupe of Souldiers) to assayle infortunate Bologna, who was sooner slayne than hee was able to thinke upon defence, and whose mishap was sutch, as hee whych kylded him had good leysure to save himselfe by reason of the little pursuite made after hym". (Painter, pp. 3-43: 42). In Bandello the only reference to Antonio's assassin appears at the very end of the *novella* when Bologna "fu dal capitano Daniele da Bozolo con tre altri compagni ben armati assalito e . . . miserabilmente morto, senza che nessuno gli potesse porger aita" [was assaulted by the captain Daniele da Bozolo together with three other well armed companions and . . . he miserably died, with none being able to help him; my translation]. Bandello, *Novella* I.xxvi.

<sup>10</sup> Bandello's version is similar to Painter's: "In questo tempo avvenne che un signore di quei del Regno, che aveva genti d'arme nel ducato di Milano, narrò tutta questa istoria al nostro Delio, e di più gli affermò che aveva commissione di far ammazzar esso Bologna, ma che non voleva diventar beccaio a posta d'altri, e che con buon modo l'aveva fatto avvertire che non gli andasse innanzi, e che di certo la moglie con i figliuoli e la cameriera erano state strangolate. (...) Quelli che cercavano di farlo uccidere, veggendo che l'effetto non succedeva, e che quel signore che aveva le genti d'arme si mostrava freddo in questa impresa, diedero la commissione a un signor di quei di Lombardia, pregandolo caldamente a far ogni cosa per farlo ammazzare" (Bandello, *Novelle*, I.xxvi).

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