

## **Art and nature in Women Beware Women**

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RENAISSANCE forum Volume 1 Number 2, September 1996: Lisa Hopkins, 'Art and Nature in *Women Beware Women*'

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It has often been observed that during the course of the play, Middleton's *Women Beware Women* appears to undergo something of a genre shift. It begins very much in the vein of a domestic tragedy, with a tight-knit, bourgeois family group discussing their concerns about money, work, and the suitability or otherwise of a recently contracted marriage alliance - Inga-Stina Ewbank comments that 'the themes of the play are the favourite domestic and social ones of love, money and class' (Ewbank 1969, 197). By the end, it has been transformed almost beyond recognition: the two most obviously middle-class of the characters, Leantio and his mother, have both disappeared from the story, one of them dead and the other simply forgotten about, and the domestic setting has given place to a courtly one, where the most elaborate of elite entertainments, complete with complex special effects and arcane mythological and allegorical resonances, rounds off the play with a spectacularly artificial finale. This is in sharp contrast to the naturalism of its opening scene, which has seen Middleton termed a seventeenth-century Ibsen (Hibbard 1957, 54). Nicholas Brooke observes that the play 'opens with apparent naturalism in a carefully designed humble factor's home, and develops by deliberate stages towards the extreme stylization of the court masque in act V' (Brooke 1979, 90), and on much the same lines Stephen Wigler remarks, 'the opening acts present the characters realistically ... but the final act subjects them to caricature as Middleton's dramaturgy takes a sudden turn into allegory and farce' (Wigler 1983, 199; Duncan 1983, 25). Dorothy M. Farr argues that 'in the fifth Act, where it should reach its resolution, the action stops short or seeps away into "staginess"' (Farr 1973, 72), while one of its editors comments that 'the play gallops to an unashamedly theatrical conclusion' (Middleton 1968, xxv), but thinks that this is because 'deprived of the convention of the masque, Middleton would have had to leave [the characters] alive, without salvation in an infinity of soulless intrigue' (Middleton 1968, xxvi).

Surely, though, this cannot be the case. Although the masque is undoubtedly a convenient way of ensuring the deaths of so many characters at once, there are - as Jacobean dramatists showed themselves so abundantly aware - other means of disposing of people. Illness, accident, duel, execution, or even less synchronised forms of individual revenge could all have served the dramatist's purpose, so that it seems logical to conclude that there are thematic as well as functional reasons for the decision to move so decisively towards the overtly performative quality of the masque. Moreover, art and artifice do not inhabit the play only in this most obvious example of their presence; they increasingly pervade its later stages, where it starts to look more and more like a self-conscious response to earlier plays like *The Queen of Corinth* (Gossett 1987, 183). I want to argue that in its consciously shifting generic allegiances, *Women Beware Women* becomes not only a public staging of the effects of art, but also, increasingly, a sustained reflection upon art, and especially in its relationship to its complementary pole of nature, in accordance with the self-reflexivity of Middleton's art in general (Lancashire 1983, 171; Morrison 1983, 236; Pentzell 1975).

The turning point in this process is undoubtedly Bianca's visit to an actual art gallery, the private collection of paintings and statues in which her seduction takes place. When the supposed

'monument' (II.ii.277) turns out to be a living duke, the arranging, shaping qualities of art find themselves unceremoniously usurped by an erratic, 'natural' lust which will transform not only the life but also the character of Bianca. It is ironic that Sir Philip Sidney's comments on the epiphanic potential of the imagination should be so grotesquely fulfilled in the unrecognisability of the Bianca who emerges from this most ostensibly 'natural' of encounters (I use inverted commas because it is now difficult to subscribe to the belief that desire, particularly male desire, is a completely instinctive drive not produced by or subject to a learned response). What we have here may well be seen as a (surely conscious) virtual rewriting of the celebrated statue scene of *The Winter's Tale*, where an apparent monument to death similarly comes to life, but this time to quench lust (in the shape of Leontes' inappropriately sexual interest in his own disguised daughter) and to exercise an influence which we regard as benign and indeed quasi-miraculous on the lives of those around. It is hard to believe that the deliberate debate on art and nature which lies so near the surface of *The Winter's Tale* is not being drawn on here too, but with a quality of vicious reversal which tips the balance of power very firmly back in the direction of art; it certainly seems to be on some such quality of the play that Inga-Stina Ewbank picks up when she refers to its scenes as 'genre-paintings' (Ewbank 1969, 201).

Until her visit to the art gallery, it might well be possible to see Bianca very much as a child of nature, her values ones of simple affection and homely desires and appetites. Nevertheless, she is explicitly presented from the outset as a child of Venice, daughter of that most sophisticated of societies which coped so ill with containing a Moor in its midst; and her love for her husband has made her a citizen of Florence. The Florence / Venice pairing is one already familiar to English Renaissance audiences from *Othello*, where it seems to account for part of the animus felt by the Venetian Iago against the Florentine Cassio. It also provides a familiar opposition in Renaissance art theory, since the two cities espoused opposing aesthetics of colour, line, and definition: 'although they did not eschew the so-called Florentine qualities of draftsmanship and linear perspective ... [t]he objectives of ... Venetian painters thus tend to be characterized in terms of their concern with colour and light at the expense of space and form' (Benton, King and Norman 1986, 27). It would be rash to suppose that Middleton had much purchase on these differences - even Nicholas Hilliard could demonstrate on occasion quite startling ignorance of the aesthetics of Italian art (Strong 1987, 16) - but he may well have been aware of tensions between the political and religious as well as the artistic agendas of the Venetian Republic and the Florence which, as we are so forcibly reminded in the play, had shed its own republican past; indeed J. B. Batchelor has suggested that we should 'see the play as a diptych, a double perspective in which a Venetian and then a Florentine present contrasting versions of the same picture' (Batchelor 1972, 209), and points out that the only names mentioned in the first scene are the two place-names of Venice and Florence (Batchelor 1972, 210), while a similar argument, based on the contrasting reputations of the two cities, is very tellingly applied to the play by J.R. Mulryne in a forthcoming paper (Mulryne 1996). Would it be too fanciful to suggest that Bianca, coming from Venice, which, because of the prevailing damp conditions, had, unlike Florence, virtually no fresco tradition (Benton, King and Norman 1986, 26), is unaware of the effect she creates when her framing within the window encloses her in effect within the visual traditions of fresco? (She is, as Verna Ann Foster points out, 'quite content to believe her mother-in-law's rejoinder that the Duke probably did not see her at all' [Foster 1979, 512]). Or that, as a Venetian born, her isolation from the Florentine cultural tradition of *intermedii* (see Fradenburg 1991, 263, and Bromham and Bruzzi 1990) is strikingly figured by the fact that she, alone of those who die at

the masque, does not interact with anyone else even to the extent of being killed by them, and has in fact to commit suicide?

At any rate, although Bianca is only too willing to renounce her cultured, patrician background, it nevertheless informs her in ways of which she herself is unaware. Moreover, however she may try to align herself with the sexual / affective orientations of the family into which she has married, the first time we see her after her initial appearance she is presented to us very much as a work of art: framed in the window, she is seen by the duke as being as much a market commodity as the wares in a shopfront; framed as a painting is, she is an object for the eye; framed as Juliet was on her balcony in Verona, she becomes an aide-memoire for the skills of the audience to compare her appearance with that of characters in other Renaissance plays. Straddling the liminal space between the privacy of the domestic interior and the public forum of the street (and straddling, too, the gap between the 'reality' of the tiring house and the fantasy world of the stage) the window encloses Bianca, and interpellates her firmly within its own multivalent frames of meaning. It is particularly ironic that balcony appearances should be so frequently associated, then as now, with the public appearances attendant on the celebration of royal weddings - the Goldenes Dachl at Innsbruck was specifically constructed for the wedding of Maximilian I to Bianca Maria Sforza - since one of the meanings the framing balcony inscribes on this Bianca is precisely that of future ducal bride. Her actual husband, however, has no desire to display her thus; when they eloped, he 'took her out... of [a] window' (IV.i.44-45) and he has, as Michael McCanles points out, an 'obsession with keeping Bianca hidden away' (McCanles 1983, 211), subscribing in effect to an aesthetic of privacy rather than of display, and treating Bianca like an objet to be hidden in a curio cabinet (at one point he tries to conceal her in a secret room) rather than public work of art. It is Bianca's own instinct to display herself, but it is her tragedy that by doing so she unwittingly inserts herself into frames which, however unaware she herself seems to be of them, will, nevertheless, frame her meaning for others.

The story of the progression of Bianca from apparent ingenue to a woman presented with all the trappings and sophistication of art is nicely counterpointed by that of Isabella, a young woman in whose education and experiences art and nature prove to be finely balanced. Initially, the gross nature of the Ward - a 'natural' indeed - seems deliberately contrasted with the presentation of his future wife. The Ward's conversation, we soon learn, revolves around food and sex: 'an egg may prove a chicken' (I.ii.98); 'I'll have a bout with the maids else, or contract myself at midnight to the larder-woman in presence of a fool or a sack-posset' (I.ii.116-7); 'I'll forswear eating eggs in moon-shine nights; there's nev'r a one I eat, but turns into a cock in four-and-twenty hours'. (I.ii.122-3). When Livia speaks of the role of women within marriage, she too talks in terms of food, but with markedly different emphasis. Referring to man in general, she says:

Besides, he tastes of many sundry dishes  
That we poor wretches never lay our lips to -  
As obedience, forsooth, subjection, duty, and such kickshaws,  
All of our making, but served in to them;  
And if we lick a finger then, sometimes,  
We are not to blame; your best cooks use it.

(I.ii.40-46)

Praising her brother until he threatens to blush, she says:

'Tis but like saying grace before a feast, then,  
And that's most comely; thou art all a feast,  
And she that has thee, a most happy guest.

(I.ii.150-3)

Food and sex are linked again in these two speeches, but very differently imaged. Instead of larder raids and the crudely mechanistic arousal of lust, Livia concentrates on the elements of care, preparation and embellishment associated with the civilised cultural rituals of cooking and feasting. In effect, Livia envisages the provision of food and sex not on the levels of basic servicing but in the realms of art. Initially she presents women, as cooks, as the artists, and the male feaster as the consumer; in her second instance, however, an ungendered cook has prepared Hippolito as a metaphorical meal for a female consumer, Isabella. In both cases, however, the 'grace' which is said before the feast serves equally well to describe the impulse to ornament which aestheticises the presentation of meals in ways of which the baser instincts of the Ward show no inkling.

It is perhaps possible to argue that a similar impulse in favour of the artificial informs Livia's most notorious act, her deliberate misleading of her niece Isabella about the circumstances of that most uncultivated of events, her birth. Polarities of art and nature structure this deception. Much stress is laid in the play on the unschooled, irrational nature of affection. Fabritio comments drolly:

I had a wife;  
She ran mad for me; she had no reason for't  
For aught I could perceive.

(I.ii.18-20)

And when asked by Livia how he accounts for his unexpected passion for Isabella, Hippolito answers:

Ev'n as easily  
As man comes by destruction, which oft-times  
He wears in his own bosom.

(II.i.2-4)

Nothing, presumably, can be more natural than that which is indigenous to one's own bosom; moreover, a contemporary audience would almost certainly have seen Hippolito's declaration of incestuous passion within the framework of 'natural law' which serves other stage incest-mongers such as D'Amville in *The Atheist's Tragedy* for a rationale (McCabe 1993, 15-21). Another epistemological perspective, however, would see Isabella's reluctance to consent as

equally 'natural', since Hippolito's request could be interpreted as based on a misconstruction of her 'natural' feelings as unnatural ones.

To this complex web of competing definitions of the natural Livia brings the most carefully crafted tissue of natural-seeming lies. Her whole story is predicated on the supposed fact that Isabella's mother had succumbed to her own baser 'nature' and committed adultery. This would therefore mean that Isabella's natural heritage is very different from the socially received version of it which posits Fabritio as her father; she would, indeed, have a natural father as well as an artificial one, and would therefore be free to follow the dictates of her nature, which, as her mother's supposedly had, steers her towards a relationship outside marriage - it is not the least cunning part of Livia's plan that the fiction she constructs about Isabella's past offers the girl an incentive to stray in the shape of so powerful a position of apparent identification with the lost parent, thus playing on the most basic and 'natural' of all affections. Isabella is therefore skilfully manoeuvred into a position in which, while actually the largely passive object of Livia's manipulation, she feels she is making an entirely autonomous choice. She is, indeed, in many respects in a position which is closely analogous to that of a character in a play, mouthing the lines which have in fact been pre-scripted by the dramatist.

The idea of the character in the play is of course one used by Middleton himself in the closing masque (White 1992, 121). Here the helps of art provide only the thinnest of veneers for a world of jungle instinct and natural law, in which the stronger or the merely luckier wreak their wills on the defenceless and unarmed. Problematic, elliptical relationships link the dramatis personae to their fictional counterparts. Hippolito and Guardiano feature as shepherds; this can be seen as fitting to Hippolito insofar as he has been Isabella's swain, and shepherds are often represented in Elizabethan literature as languishing after young women, while for Guardiano the role is apt for him in his capacity as guardian, and all the more so since it so suitably figures the Ward as his sheep, foolish and needing to be led. It sorts less well, however, with the murderous intention which Guardiano has so recently outlined to the ward - though, by a nice irony, the very piece of dialogue which in one sense destroys Guardiano's nurturing, shepherd-like image also reinforces it, given the care with which, tutor-like, he explains it to his slow Ward. The Ward himself has a role allotted - he is to play Slander (V.i.15-16), and should be dressed in 'a foul fiend's head with a long contumelious tongue i'th'chaps on't' (V.i.19-20) - but his uncle advises him not to bother preparing for it. For the Ward to be proposed as a slanderous fiend is understandable enough; it is equally appropriate to his slow understanding and ineffectuality that he should not actually perform even in a role to which he is so suited. The casting of Livia as Juno Pronuba is equally apposite, especially in view of the insistence that it is a role she has played before (IV.ii.212), although she herself appears to have forgotten this (IV.ii.213); there is a nice irony in this, for it is indeed a striking feature of Middleton's portrayal of Livia that within her corruption there is in fact an element of freshness, of a lack of malice or sense of the likely consequences of her actions, which manifests itself most noticeably in the quality of ingenuity, of response to a new challenge, which marks the elaborateness of her seductions of Isabella and Bianca. The idea that her reflex meddling is something of which she herself is unconscious is neatly captured in this suggestion that she herself has forgotten the role which everyone knows she plays. As for Isabella, her role as sacrificing nymph encapsulates the inscriptions of her as both nubile and disposable which have underlain the actions of all those who have had dealings with her throughout the play. Approaching her part, too, Isabella does not, like so many others of the

actors, seek to subvert it, but to work within its possibilities and, simultaneously, to teach others to keep within theirs:

but my sacrifice  
Shall take a course to appease you, or I'll fail in't,  
And teach a sinful bawd to play a goddess.

(IV.ii.220-2)

Helplessly bound to the concept of sacrifice, there is no scope for Isabella to reposition herself in terms which are not circumscribed by both a rhetoric and an economy of victimisation. Whereas Bianca wills her own death when she discovers her mistaken poisoning of her husband, Isabella's death - wordless, and not even noticed for ten lines - stands as a stark emblem of the powerlessness which has characterised her throughout the play.

If the bienseance of art is apparent in the casting of the characters and in the appropriateness of some of the fates which overtake them, its fallibility is abundantly evident in the poor artistry which means that so many of the plots crossing the structure of the masque ultimately fail to come to the fruition intended for them. From an early stage of the proceedings members of the audiences are troubled by marked discrepancies between the action as it unfolds and the action as it was promised in the 'argument'. As the Duke rather plaintively points out:

But soft! Here's no such persons in the argument  
As these three, Hymen, Hebe, Ganymede;  
The actors that this model here discovers  
Are only four - Juno, a nymph, two lovers.

(V.ii.65-8)

And as the Duke's attempts to follow the plot become increasingly frustrated by the confusion generated by unforeseen events, one may well feel that his own death, however unscheduled, actually comes as something of a relief to his puzzled understanding.

The trope of the ostensibly controlled performance whose events go haywire is of course a common one in Renaissance drama, from Bel-Imperia's subversion of Hieronimo's script to bring about her own death to Claudius' disruption of *The Mouse Trap* by his sudden rising; indeed I cannot offhand think of a play-within-a-play that does not take an unexpected turn. The disturbance of expectations thus generated can function as a powerful symbol for the unpredictability of life in general, for the fickleness of Fortune or the mysterious workings of Divine Providence, and offers a pointed rebuke to the hubris of characters who have dared to imagine that any event, even the performance of a play, could be wholly within their control. In this particular instance, however, it can also double as a quasi-choral expression of our own surprise at the unforeseen genre shifts that the play has undergone since its ostensibly domestic opening in Act One. That a play which opened with the homely triad of Bianca, Leantio and the Mother should end in a courtly entertainment, and that we should move from house to palace and from naturalism to artifice, may well leave us as at sea as the Duke in attempting to decode the

meaning of events, especially since we have not been provided with any 'argument' other than that constructed by our own experience of such plays - which is, of course, precisely what is being frustrated by such unusual developments. To have the theatre audience wrongfooted in this way may well have the effect that the characters are not alone in learning a lesson about the unpredictability of events. The apparently anaesthetising, distancing effects of art have in fact not spared us from the necessity of examining our own natures to think out an unguided response to events in which 'Lust and forgetfulness has been amongst us, / And we are brought to nothing' (V.ii.144-5).

Perhaps even more surprising, Middleton's extraordinary coup de théâtre of offering us a Catholic cardinal who is actually religious, and permitting him to have the last word, also forces us to confront the fact that this play offers the most unequivocally moralising perspective on events that English drama had staged for some considerable time. As in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where Middleton suddenly has Antonio close off the potential of a sliding scale on which Vindice's and Hippolito's crimes are a relative improvement on those of their victims by his abrupt reinstatement of an absolute order, so here the Cardinal insists on a total demonisation of that very sin, lust, to which the play has shown we are all so 'naturally' prone. Art does not shield us from this necessity of confronting our own nature; rather, it forces us the more directly into confrontation with it, since the Cardinal's closing couplet is offered not so much as a comment on a particular situation but rather as a general apophthegm applicable to all. Rather than the classically tragic effect of vicarious catharsis, the aesthetic here seems to be one of the morality play and its relation to everyman: indeed Nicholas Brooke sees the play as precisely demonstrating 'the absurdity of worshipping tragedy as a moral force: it is exposed as being as morally dangerous as it is aesthetically perfect' (Brooke 1979, 110). It is perhaps a pity that the Ward was never allowed to play his part of Slander; but then that, in this most city-bound of plays (Hopkins 1994, 1-6), would only ever have been permissible in the out-parishes, where the rules pertaining within the city boundaries would not have applied. Within urban limits, close proximity and the many arts of city life, from etiquette to architecture, force categories of art and nature into constant confrontation, and reveal their complex interpenetrations. It is perhaps only what one would expect of the city tragedian Middleton that when his characters enter the higher social status of the court, with its accompanying genre elevation from city to courtly tragedy, they prove not to have gained but to have horribly lost by the exchange; and in what could perhaps be seen as a trademark of Middleton's own art, the sting in the end of the play proves to be not so much in the area of unexpected developments in the plot, as of abrupt reversal in the ways in which we are invited to receive the play. While art may have been used to sugar the imparting of the moral message, a moral rather than an aesthetic response to events is, nevertheless, unequivocally what we now find demanded of us.

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