“FULL OF RAPTURE”.
MATERNAL VOCALITY AND MELANCHOLY IN
WEBSTER’S DUCHESS OF MALFI

Marion A. Wells

Summary

In early modern medicine the pregnant woman becomes a particularly fraught example of bodily fusion partly because she seems to exemplify the vulnerability of one soul to another’s emotional perturbations: stories abound of women ‘imprinting’ their unborn children with the stigmata of their own unruly passions. I will argue in this paper that in The Duchess of Malfi Webster’s portrayal of the genesis of male melancholy within a story of transgressive pregnancy and childbirth provides the conditions for an exploration of the passions that complicates recent work on the humoralism of early modern psychology. Exploring the role of maternal voice as a powerful ‘spiritual’ catalyst for emotional perturbation, I will suggest that the maternal-foetal relationship acts as a model for a more broadly conceived view of what I call the material relationality of the passionate subject. Through its emphasis on the role of the imagination and the dynamic interplay between subjects in the development of melancholy, the play offers an account of melancholy as a complex psycho-physiological disorder not reducible to the role of black bile in the body.

Introduction

When Bosola, one of the characters in Webster’s Duchess of Malfi (ca. 1614), addresses himself to the origin of the tears that he unexpectedly produces at the death of the Duchess, he remarks: ‘This is manly sorrow: | These tears, I am very certain, never grew | In my mother’s milk’ (4, 2, 353). In Shakespeare’s Henry V, Exeter does attribute his tears to an irrepressible maternal influence, in terms that ruefully acknowledge rather than deny the impossibility of truly ‘manly sorrow’:

The pretty and sweet manner of it forced
Those waters from me which I would have stopped.
But I had not so much of man in me,
And all my mother came into mine eyes
And gave me up to tears.
(Henry V, 4, 6, 28–32)\(^1\)

Both statements evoke the fungibility of maternal and filial bodies in early modern medical thought, suggesting not only the possibility of an emotional as well as physical connectedness between mother and child but also the seamless continuity between those two categories. Bosola’s ‘manly sorrow’ is eventually identified as ‘melancholy’ – a diagnosis supported by the tears themselves, which were a recognised symptom of melancholy.\(^2\) Like his employer, the Duchess’s brother Duke Ferdinand, whose more florid displays of madness dominate the play, Bosola ends the play suffering from this most fashionable of early modern diseases.\(^3\) In studying the play’s treatment of the aetiology of melancholy in these men I will tease out the implications of Bosola’s anxious resistance to the idea of maternal influence, suggesting that it dramatises not only Bosola’s but also the play’s ambivalence about the nature and origin of his melancholy – and of emotional perturbation more generally.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Gary Taylor offers a tellingly misleading note on this passage in his edition of Henry V (Oxford: 1982), suggesting that the ‘unmanly loss of control’ described here ‘is probably related to the mother = hysteria’. The implications of this ahistorical slippage from the ‘mother’ (meaning ‘womb’) to the disease of hysteria are fully documented by Kaara Petersen in relation to similar notes on the well-known case of Lear’s ‘hysterica passio’. See n. 50 below.
\(^2\) See Lange M., Telling Tears in the English Renaissance (Leiden: 1996), chapter 1, for a useful discussion of the medical linkages between tears and melancholy in early modern medicine.
\(^3\) For a discussion of the fashionable nature of melancholy in this period, see Babb L., The Elizabethan Malady. A Study of Melancholy in English from 1580–1642 (East Lansing: 1951) 3.
\(^4\) The editors of the recent work Reading the Early Modern Passions acknowledge that ‘the word emotion did not become a term for feeling until about 1660, around the time that ‘individual’ took on its modern meaning’; Paster G. – Rowe K. – Floyd-Wilson M. (eds.), Reading the Early Modern Passions. Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion (Philadelphia: 2004) 2. Thomas Dixon usefully cautions against using the terms ‘passions’ and ‘emotions’ interchangeably, but notes that Descartes’ Passions de l’âme (1649) does seem to use the term ‘émotions’ as a fairly broad umbrella term for the movements of the soul, and may have influenced the Scottish philosophers’ development of the term ‘emotion’; Dixon T., From Passions to Emotions. The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category (Cambridge: 2003) 13. I am aware, then, of the terminological difficulties involved in talking about early modern passions, emotions, and ‘psychological’ states in general, particularly since what we think of as largely ‘mental’ states were irreducibly bound up with physical states in the medical writing of the period. But since I regard this period as working flexibly with a changing conception of mental states that draws on classical humoralism while moving inexorably towards what Jacques Bos sees as an increasing emphasis on ‘individuality and