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The American Shakespeare Company

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A melancholic Pericles, René Thornton Jr. also made a sympathetic, gentle, and thoroughly domestic Antonio in the *Duchess of Malfi*, one whose masculinity couldn't have differed more sharply from the other men on stage (or, to be sure, from the "masculinity" of his powerful Duchess). All the characters save Antonio, moreover, seemed sex-saturated: the leather-clad, incestuous Ferdinand (Greg Phelps); the appetitive Cardinal (Ben Curns, who at one point entered with his mistress Julia wrapped around his waist); and certainly James Keegan's seductive Bosola, brilliantly played here as an isolated, marginalized figure increasingly disgusted with the world and his own role in it. In Thornton's rendition, Antonio was far from an upstart schemer. When the Duchess (a superlative Morosco) proposed marriage he seemed genuinely surprised by the turn of events—and touched by the Duchess's sudden and uncharacteristic [End Page 182] show of vulnerability. The private marriage the Duchess seeks with Antonio made perfect sense, given her alternatives ("why should I, of all the other princes in the world, be cased up like a holy relic?"). Perhaps the show's most memorable moment (second only to the "dance of madmen" in 4.2) came in the Duchess' macabre death. Here, the actors made impressive use of the space of the stage in a complex strangulation scene. As she stood in the open trapdoor, the Duchess was strangled by ropes attached to her from three different directions and held by black-clad executioners stationed at different points of the stage, including above. The ropes pulled taut; the Duchess crumpled, her limp body then carefully laid out in her coffin to the singing of a dirge. Indeed, the moment was so effective one felt it ought to have ended the show—how could any action resume after this? I happened to see *The Duchess of Malfi* the night before it opened officially, and not all the actors were off book for the performance. These visible rough edges didn't detract from the overall effect; in fact, it was exciting knowing that we were watching an experiment still in progress (invited behind the curtain, so to speak). Perhaps the audience's sense of excitement at watching something inherently risky gives this season its special edginess.