

MORAL VISION IN “THE DUCHESS OF MALFI”

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The Duchess of Malfi was first performed some time in 1613 or early 1614 by the king’s Men and published nine or ten years later by John Waterson in 1623. Unlike Webster’s earlier tragedy, *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* seems to have been fairly successful on the stage. As the title page of the 1623 quarto claims, it had been successfully performed at both the Globe and the Blackfriars. The late publication of this play lends credence to the theory that its stage popularity remained undiminished for several years, for it was customary for playwrights and actors not to publish a play as long as it continued to attract audiences. The fact also explains why most of Shakespeare’s plays were not published during his life time.

Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights seldom invented the plots of their plays; instead they took them from some old stories, national history, legend or folklore. Webster based the story of *The Duchess of Malfi* on a true story which must have had the value of a scandal in its own time and which was reported by several writers. Giovanna d’ Aragona was married to the duke of Malfi when she was barely twelve. When she was nineteen or twenty, her husband died. Some years later she married a gentleman Antonio Bologna but did not make the marriage public. When her brothers, Lodovico and Carlo learnt of her secret marriage, she and her two children were arrested and kept at Malfi where they were killed. Antonio was murdered by their agent Daniel de Bozolo.

Because of its sensational value, the story appeared in several versions. Matteo Bandello told this story in his twenty sixth novella. Bellefoies told it in a more detailed manner in the second volume of his *History Tragiques* published in 1565. Two years later William Painter told this story in English in his *Place of Pleasure*. It was this version that Webster used as the principal source of *The Duchess of Malfi*. But he made many changes in the story available to him. In Painter’s account Cardinal and Ferdinand employed many spies and hirelings to keep an eye on the Duchess and later hired the services of Bosola to murder Antonio. Webster has combined all these roles into just one character: Bosola. Secondly, the catastrophe in Webster play is his own invention. The two brothers outlived the Duchess by many years and did not die

as a result of their responsibility for her murder. Again the character of Julia is Webster's own creation so that she acts as a foil to the Duchess. These changes introduced by Webster were meant to make the play a meaningful whole to manipulate the sympathy of the audience in favor of the heroine.

Act I introduces all the main characters- The Duchess, her two brothers, Ferdinand and the cardinal, Antonio and Bosola. It introduces the reasons for and the nature of the conflict between the Duchess, the protagonist and the antagonists, her brothers. Before we learn about the Duchess' plan to remarry, the two brothers exhort the Duchess against remarriage. They get Bosola, their spy, planted in the court of the Duchess so that he can keep an eye on the people who visit her and whom she tends to favor. When the Duchess ignores their advice and marries Antonio, she is aware of the hostility of her two brothers. She knows that she is going into a "wilderness". Cariola, her waiting woman, is full of pity for the Duchess' "fearful madness". To put it differently. Webster not only introduces the central conflict but also suggests its tragic inevitability for the Duchess. For given the nature of the two brothers, described in detail by both Antonio and Bosola, their opposition to her marriage will be both violent and perverse. In the characters of the Cardinal, Ferdinand and Bosola, Webster also introduces the general corruption, evil and moral degeneration prevailing in the world of the play.

Act II builds straightway on Act I by showing the first outcome of the Duchess' action in the form of the birth of her son. The second outcome is the information that reaches the two brothers. When the Cardinal and Ferdinand learn the birth of her child, they speak of revenge- Ferdinand reels and rants. Though somehow several years lapse (time during which the Duchess gives birth to two more children), Ferdinand threat is very much there. This threat materializes in Act III when Ferdinand comes to Malfi and surprises the Duchess in her bedchamber. The Duchess plans an escape to Ancona but as she takes Bosola into confidence, the outcome of her escape is a foregone conclusion. She is arrested before the end of Act III and taken to Malfi, where we meet her in Act IV.

Act IV is entirely about the Duchess where she suffers torture after torture, both physical and mental. Both Ferdinand and Bosola, through the devices of wax- figures, the dance of the madmen, the offer of a dead man's hand, equally importantly, by Bosola's efforts to break her spirit inflict torture after torture on the Duchess, until she is killed. The Duchess' lofty and solemn nature even in despair is shown here as while dying she says:

I m Duchess of Malfi still (IV,ii,136)

She does express a feeling of confidence in the other world towards the end:

Who would be afraid on't

Knowing to meet such excellent company

In the other world.(IV,ii,205-7)

When Ferdinand sees his sister dead, he has a fit of remorse:

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young. (IV, ii, 258)

It is when Bosola has murdered the Duchess that he comes to realize the Machiavellian nature of Ferdinand who instead of reward threatens him of dire consequences. He decides to act as an avenger for the murder of the Duchess. Bosola begins to develop a conscience:

I stand like one
That long hath ta'en a sweet and golden dream:
I am angry with myself, now that I wake. . . .
What would I do, were this to do again?
I would not change my peace of conscience
For all the wealth of Europe. (IV, ii, 300-18)

In the beginning of Act V, Antonio resolves to confront the Cardinal. He does not know yet of his wife's death. Ferdinand has developed a horrible disease called "Lycanthropia" which makes him imagine that he is a wolf. Bosola resolves to help Antonio but he fails in his attempt to assist Antonio, whom he kills by mistake and whose death he hastens:

Antonio?
The man I would have sav'd 'bove mine own life!
We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and banded
Which way please them. O good Antonio,
I'll whisper one thing in thy dying ear,
Shall make thy heart break quickly. Thy fair duchess
And two sweet children— . . . are murder'd. (V, iv, 52-59)

Bosola kills Ferdinand and the Cardinal and is himself killed; his final reflections seem to sum up both the moral development of the play and his own struggle to discover his good nature:

Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi, murder'd
By the Arragonian brethren; for Antonio,
Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
Poison'd by this man; and lastly for myself,
That was an actor in the main of all
Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th' end
Neglected. . . . (V,v,77-83)

In light of all that has gone before, the final, hopeful lines spoken in the play by Delio resonate ironically with Bosola's sense that he has gone or is going on "another voyage":

Integrity of life is fame's best friend,

Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end. (V, v, 128-9)

In this way, albeit Webster has succeeded in transferring the world of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche on the stage, there is a vital paradox highlighting the chasm between the conventions on the one hand and the integrity of the moral vision on the other, says Norman Rabkin. It is not the marriage of the Duchess with a steward, which is shameful, rather it is the moral compromise involved in hiding it that is at the centre of the moral vision of the play. The characters of Webster might be cynically pessimists, but they are never blind to the moral truth and values of life and this distinguishes Webster from the rest of the contemporary dramatists. That is why, the theme of retribution and redemption leading to the moral vision is not only illustrated but even justified by the Vth act of the play in which some kind of moral awareness comes to all- Bosola, Cardinal, Ferdinand and Antonio.

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