

Female imprisonment in the Duchess of Malfi

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Abstract:

The Duchess' haughty assertion of nobility, to make opponents her low footsteps are seen to be blind to the socio-political realities that surround her. Hence in many senses though the Duchess is deemed pure and genuinely bound to love and a fertile marriage with Antonio we can see it is her blindness to the socio-political realities of the true evil of her brothers and the corruption of the court that surrounds her that leads to her inviting her own destruction as she is not cognizant of her subordinated status as a woman in Jacobean times. Therein lies the tragedy, the Duchess wilfully asserts her right to love and marry on the basis of her own preferences disregarding her brothers wishes and is subsequently destroyed by her brothers for what they deem an illegitimate marriage which is an offence to their power.

Keywords: Webster; Duchess; Love; Corruption; Evil

The Duchess of Malfi is about the failed attempt by the Duchess to assert her female identity as a wife and mother with autonomy from her corrupt and evil brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal. When widowed, the Duchess is given explicit commands by her brothers not to remarry as they deem it a threat to their power if she were to marry to any non strategic man not aligned to their corrupt plans for power. Nonetheless, the Duchess defiantly goes ahead with her pursuit of Antonio her servant who is deemed inferior to her but whom she has a genuine attachment to emotionally and spiritually and whom she truly views as a partner in courtship and love with whom she has a

fruitful marriage blessed with children. The play is then about the inability of the Duchess to pursue a private life apart from her public persona as a Duchess as when the evil brothers find out her marriage they are quick to destroy and eliminate the Duchess as they view a marriage below her class and to a non strategic partner a threat to their absolute power.

“He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich, and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them. Could I be one of their flattering panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off.”

Bosola (1.1.47-51)

It is clear from the above quote that the corruption of the court of Malfi is clearly at its head with the brothers who have an all consuming desire for power. They are rich with an endless supply of sycophants who seek to benefit corruptly from their power and even Bosola desires to be such a sycophant if he were only given the chance. Bosola is a figure of the malcontent, disenchanted with his low status in society and railing against it because it does not benefit him but his choice of allegiance with the Cardinal is eventually regretted as he seeks revenge for the Duchess and her family by killing the Cardinal and Ferdinand in the end as he experiences genuine pity and sympathy for the Duchess whom her brothers have ruthlessly destroyed when she failed to be a pawn to their bid for power.



I would have you curse yourself now, that
your bounty,

Which makes men truly noble, e'er should
make

Me a villain. O, that to avoid ingratitude

For the good deed you have done me, I must
do

All the ill man can invent. Thus the devil

Candies all sins o'er; and what heaven terms
vile,

That names he complimentary."

Bosola (1.1.262-8)

Bosola thus bears some internal conflict with regards to his employment by the evil brothers to spy on the Duchess and eventually enact their punishment of her – he feels that he is acting out of gratitude to the brothers ironically for being made complicit in their demonic sins and crimes. But Bosola is eventually to regret this allegiance with evil whom he has served in hopes of advancing his low status throughout the play when he revenges the Duchess by killing Ferdinand and the Cardinal.

"Duchess: I am Duchess of Malfi still.

Bosola: That makes thy sleeps so broken:

Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine
bright,

But looked to near, have neither heat, nor
light."

(4.2.134-7)

The Duchess asserts her true nobility in the face of death, asserting that her brothers may strip her of her rights to a family by murdering them but that they cannot take away her human dignity and essential

nobility as the Duchess of Malfi. While Bosola tries to dissuade her from gaining any comfort in her rank as a Duchess, her maintenance of nobility and identity in the face of death stands in stark contrast with her brothers who fear death and the afterlife because of all the evil they have committed in their earthly lives.

Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred

Lay in my way unto this marriage,

I'd make them my low footsteps; and even
now,

Even in this hate, as men in some great
battles,

By apprehending danger, have achieved

Almost impossible actions (I have heard
soldiers say so)

So I, through frights, and threatenings, will
assay

This dangerous venture."

The Duchess (1.1.332-9)

The Duchess' clear defiance of her brothers instructions not to remarry are seen in this passage. Her haughty assertion of nobility, to make opponents her low footsteps are seen to be blind to the socio-political realities that surround her. Hence in many senses though the Duchess is deemed pure and genuinely bound to love and a fertile marriage with Antonio we can see it is her blindness to the socio-political realities of the true evil of her brothers and the corruption of the court that surrounds her that leads to her inviting her own destruction as she is not cognizant of her subordinated status as a woman in Jacobean times. Therein lies the tragedy, the Duchess wilfully asserts her right to love and marry on the basis of her own preferences disregarding her brothers wishes and is subsequently destroyed by her brothers for what they deem



an illegitimate marriage which is an offence to their power.

We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,

That, ruined, yields no echo. Fare you well.

It may be pain, but no harm to me to die

In so good a quarrel. O, this gloomy world!

In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,

Doth, womanish and fearful, mankind live!"

Bosola (5.5.96-101)

Bosola has always sold himself to the powers that be to serve himself and finds that this does not give him a life of integrity or a life to celebrate at the end. It is ironic that he refers to mankind as womanish because this cowardice and fear of death only manifests itself in the Cardinal and Ferdinand as they face death but not the Duchess as she has boldly maintained her identity and integrity in the face of death. Hence while the brothers evinced great masculinity in the play with their corrupt assertions of power we see that it is eventually only the Duchess who evinces courage in the face of death because she has nothing to fear as she has led a life of nobility and integrity while the brothers have killed to suit their needs for power corruptly.

"I would have you lead your fortune by the hand,/Unto your marriage bed

(You speak in me this, for we now are one):

We'll only lie, and talk together, and plot

T'appease my humorous kindred; and if you please,

Like the old tale, in 'Alexander and Lodovic',

Lay a naked sword between us, keep us chaste."

The Duchess (1.1.485-91)

The purity of the Duchess is seen here in this quote and she is not a lusty widow as her brothers describe but genuinely in love with Antonio and concerned with chastity and not caught up merely in concupiscence but with pure notions of marriage and romance as well. The fertility of the Duchess in her subsequent childbearing evinces the sanctity of the marriage and the wholeness of the marriage that stands in contrast to the Cardinal's corrupt liaison with Julia.

"Let me know

Wherefore I should be thus neglected. Sir,

I served your tyranny, and rather strove

To satisfy yourself, than all the world;

And though I loathed the evil, yet I loved

You that did counsel it, and rather sought

To appear a true servant than an honest man."

Bosola (4.2.319-25)

Herein lies Bosola's error: He has sought above all to be a loyal servant, all the while knowing and being cognizant of the fact that he was actually serving the cause of evil though he loathed it but was persuaded to love and pursue it through the counsel of the evil Cardinal and Ferdinand. A similar error has been made in Nazi Germany when many of the Nazis claimed they were merely following Hitler's orders but we see there is ultimately no reprieve for those who commit evil under whichever guise, Bosola is eventually to state that he feels he has no free will and that his fate is determined by the stars of which he is a tennis ball to fate. However this is relinquishing agency and responsibility where in the beginning Bosola had clearly sought to benefit from the corruption of the evil brothers to raise himself from his low status in society. Hence Bosola is not merely a tennis ball of the stars



but a moral agent who has erred on the side of evil which he chose to serve willingly with the intention of profiting and benefiting from his allegiance with evil. But Bosola is not without conscience as he turns from siding Ferdinand and the Cardinal to the Duchess whom he avenges by killing the evil brothers in the end.

Bosola: Do you not weep?

Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out.

The element of water moistens the earth,

But blood flies upwards, and bedews the heavens.

References:

- [1.] Webster, John. The Duchess of Malfi, A & C Black limited, London, 1993.

Ferdinand: Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young.”

(4.2.252-6)

Ferdinand thus ultimately experiences guilt for his relentless punishment of the Duchess for asserting her sexuality, in this we see that the Duchess, with her true marriage of love and integrity was a source of light and causes Ferdinand's eyes to dazzle with guilt as she died young. Ferdinand with his incestuous desire of the Duchess and his turn to lycanthropy was a source of darkness rather than light and we see in this quote that Ferdinand truly experiences the Duchess' death as an indictment of his dark and depraved desire for her that led him to murder her for asserting her sexuality.