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| ***We follow after bubbles, blown in th'air. Pleasure of life, what is't? Only the good hours of an ague*** |  |

The Jacobean age was one of questioning and uncertainty about many issues, such as religion, politics and law. At the same time it was rediscovering the potency of Classical texts of Rome and Greece, and reinterpreting tragic form to suit its own ends. *The Duchess of Malfi* is a revenge tragedy, but Webster has used the form for much more than just its entertainment value; he has used it as a vehicle for the exploration of some themes relevant to the society of his time.

Webster based his plot on a true story set in Italy, and kept the Italian setting because like Shakespeare and other playwrights of his day, he had to use politically-acceptable foreign settings in which to explore ideas such as those presented in *The Duchess of Malfi*, (which were really commentaries on the England of their own era), to do with inequality, injustice, and corruption, without causing outrage in response to his work.

**Antonio and The Duchess**

The fact that Antonio can never have an equal relationship with the Duchess has prompted some readers to feel that his importance as a character in the play is limited, while others suggest that his main role is as a mouthpiece for Webster's own judgements and opinions. To assess the importance of his role we need to consider it relation to the Duchess, and in the context of the play as a whole.

Inequalities of power associated with gender and social status are highlighted in the relationship between The Duchess and Antonio, and the reactions of others towards their relationship.

In Antonio's self-deprecating dying speech,

Antonio: We follow after bubbles, blown in th'air. [Act V, Scene iv]

we see that he admits to his life having been filled more with promise than performance. He is a good man, but has been no match for the situation in which Webster placed him.

Antonio is introduced into the play as an outsider to Amalfi, returning home along with his confidant Delio. Delio can be perceived as a more intelligent character than Antonio; almost the 'counsellors counsellor', and more down-to-earth than his friend. Their dialogue serves to introduce the audience to the theme of how a well-governed court could be run, which will contrast dramatically to the corrupt Antonio will find at Amalfi.

At the court they encounter Bosola, the malcontent, who later likens the virtuous Antonio to a 'cedar planted by a spring', an image which contrasts to Bolola's view of the Aragon brothers (The Duchess's brothers: The Cardinal and Ferdinand) as,

plum trees, that grow crooked [Act 1, Scene i]

Being of lower social status, Antonio is perhaps an unlikely match for the scheming Duchess, and being an honest man he is uncomfortable with the plotting and deceit in which he becomes involved. Antonio is considered to be equal to the Duchess in that he has acquired the level of education necessary to be a counsellor; he has gained status, in terms of the Renaissance humanist tradition, by absorbing scholarship in order to improve himself, but as he well knows himself, he can never equal The Duchess in blood. His predicament shows that as well as creating him as a character in his own right, Webster is using him as a device with which to make points about the society of the time.

While it was quite common for a male figure of power to marry below his station, it was quite unacceptable for a noble female to conduct herself in that way.

Duchess: I am Duchess of Malfi still [Act !V, Scene ii]

Thus, even when married to her, Antonio can never be her equal in power.

Powerful women, being considered by some to be unnatural and dangerous, provoked much controversy at the time, a pertinent example being Queen Elizabeth Tudor.

The Duchess is seen right from the start as a lusty character who is pursuing the affection of Antonio. Her dialogue is full of sexual innuendo, and she can be seen as being in the category of the renaissance stereotype the 'lusty widow'. She is presented as a powerful woman with a dominant will and right to the moment of her death is portrayed as strong and independent. Defying her brother's warnings not to remarry is further proof of her strength.

The Duchess's defiant insistence on marrying Antonio, her second husband, is an action which shows that she has her own desires, and a more dominant will than anybody around her. Webster has given her all the qualities that Antonio, her spouse, lacks, qualities which were not thought to be desirable in a woman of that era; she plots, schemes and has a bold and impetuous nature.

She is also a fundamentally good character, and her dislike of the darkness:

Duchess: They that enter there,  
Must go upon their knees [Act 4, Scene ii]

shows how she is an opposite of Ferdinand who moves about her in a black disguise.

Thus *The Duchess of Malfi* hinges around a female protagonist, and, like Antonio's, her predicament shows how the play's themes are underpinned by Webster's thinking about social issues of his day. Ironically, he is making points about women's rights at a time when only men were allowed to act on the stage.

Like many playwrights of the time Webster had a legal background, and this served to make him more aware of the inequalities of the law involving women. He has a sensitive awareness of these inequalities and the play illustrates the ridiculous views taken by the community.

Duchess: We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us [Act 1, Scene ii]

In that line we can see that Webster has emphasised The Duchess's commanding character by his use of language. The play has been written mainly in unrhymed iambic pentameter of five stresses and ten syllables per line, which was the norm for the blank verse of renaissance dramas. Like all good playwrights of the time he has occasionally bent the rules of this set pattern to make the lines shorter or longer, for example to show a character's unbalanced nature. The Duchess's line breaks the metre by being slightly too long, showing that she refuses to be restrained, and adding power to the point she is making.

Antonio fears that his feelings for the Duchess are little more than 'mad ambition', and in this respect we can liken him to Banquo in Shakespeare's play Macbeth; a man who lacks drive because he believes that ambition brings about the downfall of good men. Antonio proves to be useless in any crisis and in Act 5 is even unaware that his wife and children have been needlessly murdered. The Duchess, in contrast, accepts death nobly and faces her fate with serenity.

Corruption is an important theme in the play.

Duchess: He [Ferdinand] left this with me  
She shows the poignard.  
Antonio: And it seems, did wish you would use it on yourself?  
Duchess: His action seem'd to intend so much. [Act 3, Scene ii]

This interchange is just one small illustration of how moral corruption is rife throughout the court of Amalfi. The only characters seemingly not tainted are Antonio and the Duchess. The Duchess may have chosen Antonio for this very reason, as he is a good and honest man and not a sycophant of the court. Even the Cardinal, a representative of religion, is full of dishonesty and murders his mistress.

Paradoxically, the corruption rife in the religious orders is explained in humanist terms by Antonio's simile for politics and good government:

A prince's court  
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow  
Pure silver-drops in general. But if't chance   
Some curs'd example poison't near the head,  
Death and diseases through the whole land spread [Act 1, Scene i]

The corrupt motives of those around them bring about the downfall of the couple, which is an inevitable outcome of a revenge tragedy. As we have seen, Webster has woven the play into this genre and also raised many points about beliefs of the Jacobean time. The Duchess has done nothing legally wrong and Webster's exposure of the Cardinal's hypocrisy reveals how unjust and tragic the fate of Antonio and his wife really is.

So we have seen that Antonio does have a substantial role in his own right. He is a good man who, due to his learning, had gained an intimacy with the Duchess, but he is the victim of a corrupt society. At the same time he has been shaped to show the inequalities of the period and highlight the corruption of nobility. The evidence shows that the presentation of Antonio serves to show both sides of an argument. His marriage could have been successful, but is deemed unorthodox, inappropriate and draws moral censure in at least three ways; it is unequal, it is in secret and it is the Duchess's second marriage.

As good man destroyed by an unjust and corrupt society, we can understand the despair in Antonio's dying words:

Antonio: Pleasure of life, what is't? Only the good hours of an ague. [Act 5, Scene iv]

**Ferdinand and Bosola**

The character Ferdinand, the Duchess's brother, is notable for his exaggerated feelings and violent and abusive language. Some may feel that his characterisation is so extreme that it makes it difficult to take *The Duchess of Malfi* seriously, but he plays a central role in the dynamics of the play, and represents a personality-type which could just as easily exist today as in Webster's time.

Ferdinand: And women like the part, which, like the lamprey,  
Hath ne'er a bone in't.

Duchess: Fie, sir!

Ferdinand: Nay,  
I mean the tongue [Act 1, Scene ii]

This double-entendre shows Ferdinand's dark side. His persistent sexual innuendo aimed at his sister throughout the play shows that he has an abrasive temperament and unbalanced emotions. But discourteous and sickening as his behaviour is, he plays a pivotal role in the play.

Ferdinand is a younger repressed twin, and his wish for the death of The Duchess can be interpreted in many ways, his intentions towards his sister having been the source of much conjecture by critics. He obviously wants to dominate her and control her, but his wish appears somewhat futile, as she has been married before, and has thus gained her powerful status.

Ferdinand appears to lack the freedom of both of his siblings, as not only is his sister in a more powerful position than he is, but also his brother The Cardinal has the authority to practice politics on a much wider scale and can be present wherever he chooses. Ferdinand is torturously inhibited, and his brother's blasphemous affair and subsequent murder of his lover is painful to him, as is his brooding on his sister

In the shameful act of sin [Act 2, Scene v]

Incest was widely used as a theme in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600) and Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King And No King* (1611) being examples which Webster may have had in mind whilst writing *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). The brother-sister incest theme was also take up later, spectacularly, by John Ford in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633).

Webster has given Ferdinand the capacity for extreme love and hate. He is not married and appears to be without a mistress, which adds to his sense of alienation and inability to relate to women. Therefore he turns upon his sister who with her new-found freedom is an obvious target. Powerful women were considered unnatural and dangerous at the time, and Ferdinand is used as a mouthpiece for the public's judgements.

Ferdinand: There is a kind of honey-dew that's deadly:  
'Twill poison your fame. [Act 1, Scene ii]

A modern day parallel to the marriage of The Duchess and Antonio might be a couple marrying with a large age gap, or a homosexual relationship. As with the relationship between the Duchess and Antonio these relationships are perfectly legal, but in the eyes of a narrow-minded and inflexible society are seen as deplorable.

In Webster's time most widows did not remarry, usually because they found themselves in a state of freedom and those left wealthy had the means to enjoy it. Webster brings his background in the legal profession to bear on the issues, showing the loopholes in the law of verbal contracts as an acceptable form of marriage.

Ferdinand is completely legally wrong to label his sister's children as 'bastards':

Ferdinand: For though our national law distinguish bastards [Act 4, Scene i]

And he exasperates her further by his doubt about their christening. Ferdinand constantly torments his sister with his madness. He is the antithesis of the cruel and coldly-calculating Cardinal, whose behaviour is less sinister than Ferdinand's which is motivated by his wild and fiery spirit. Ferdinand revels in the dark and in the play it is mentioned that he suffers with lycanthropia, a disease that makes the host believe he is a werewolf. The Duchess in contrast shuns the dark that Ferdinand operates in around her.

Bosola, whose character puts him in the category of the Renaissance dramatists' 'type', 'the malcontent', is in the service of Ferdinand, acting as a spy on The Duchess. He provides a great comedy element to the play, even though he is actually disgustingly unpleasant.

Bosola: She resembled an abortive hedgehog. [Act 2, Scene i]

He is the character who appeals to the working class in the audience who go to plays to see a blood-bath as entertainment. Webster also enjoys a pun on his name as 'Bos' can mean a protuberance on the body, or be slang for masterfulness.

Bosola can be likened to Feste in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, in that he has the independence to roam among all strata of society and support all sides at once. But The Duchess makes a big mistake by trusting him, as he is the one who kills her on the order of Ferdinand.

With his dying breath Ferdinand comments on fate with an intriguing metaphor:

Ferdinand: Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust [Act 5, Scene v]

The diamond is a recurring image, and here echoes a speech made by the Duchess just before she is strangled.

Duchess: What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut  
With diamonds? [Act 4, Scene ii]

Ferdinand may be acknowledging the downfall of his family by the dust in relation to the blood tie. His demise is a slide into isolation where every last light is extinguished.

It has often been pointed out that *The Duchess of Malfi* is a flawed play. For example Ferdinand reveals to Bosola a possible motive for wanting his sister to be murdered:

Ferdinand: To have gain'd an infinite mass of treasure by her death. [Act 5, Scene ii]

But this sounds unconvincing, as Malfi is little more than a poor fishing village. Moments such as these in the play have led it to be criticised for its plot, and it has other flaws. For example is it plausible that the Duchess could marry Antonio and have children in secret? Webster tends to neglect the importance of The Duchess' sons, and in Act 5 we see Delio apparently with a false heir.

But in spite of these flaws *The Duchess of Malfi* has lasted and remained popular, not just for its potent entertainment value and Webster's masterful use of language, but also for the insights it gives us into Jacobean society.