

Social Conventions and Libido as Contrapuntal Axes in *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Providing a clear picture about the politics of seventeenth century English marriage, law and the freedom of women, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is a play about breaking tradition that instigates criticism even today. The Duchess woos and marries her household steward violating the Jacobean class restrictions and appears as a strong woman in her resolution of remarriage-- an incident which influences much of the later actions of the play. Her remarriage is certainly an impudent act, but the fundamental question remains unanswered: why does this young widow remarry in such an apparently hasty manner? The audiences get much scope to question the wisdom of her action and also see the consequences it brings at the end. This paper examines briefly how Webster manipulates a balance between the social conventions and the libidinal desire (what the Duchess admits to Antonio: "This is flesh, and blood, Sir" I.i.453)¹ to achieve a dramatic effect in the story where "structural order is violated when the titled protagonist dies one act before the play's end" (Blessing).

The play begins with Antonio's return to Malfi and meeting his old friend Delio after a long absence in France. While they exchange the latest developments and events, Antonio reports about corruption that he has observed spreading in the Duchess's court without spoiling her character. The Duchess asks Cariola about Antonio's immediate arrival and in the intervening time she is advised by her brother Ferdinand to recruit Bosola, an ex-galley prisoner, as her stable-master. Both her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal desire Bosola to act as their spy on the Duchess's private life. They make their intention clear that their widowed sister should not remarry and openly express their resentment of her remarriage. The Cardinal terrorizes her by saying "The marriage night / Is the entrance into some prison" (I.i.323-4) and Ferdinand frightens her even against thinking of it: "Your darkest actions--nay, your privat'st thoughts-- / Will come to light" (I.i.315-6). Ferdinand physically warns her with a dagger and coarsely suggests that women are attracted to that human organ which is "like lamprey, /Hath ne'er a bone in't" (I.i.336-37). The reference to the boneless eel reasonably

irritated the Duchess and she protests at his vulgarity. Critic William Archer disapproving the hostile opposition of the brothers, says "No motive is assigned in the earlier part of the play for brothers' virulent and almost monomaniac opposition to the very idea of their sister's marrying again" (47)², but Clifford Leech notes "there is a quality in [Ferdinand's] words to his sister that fits ill with Antonio's praise of her virtue . . ." (12).

With this contradiction, the drama, almost immediately unfolds itself into her own room, where the Duchess discloses to her maid Cariola that though it may prove dangerous, she has very little regard for her brothers' words, and says, "Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage, / I'd make them my low footsteps" (I.i.341-43). She reveals plans for marriage: "let old wives report / I wink'd and chose a husband" (I.i.348-49). However insolent and impertinent she may sound, Webster symbolically suggests isolation and vulnerability through her solitary stage image (Gibbons xx). While both brothers preach against remarrying with a similar attitude she sharply remarks, "I think this speech between you both was studied, / it came so roundly off" (I.i.328-29), but the quick violation of her own promise convinces the audiences that she has already decided to woo Antonio. Her desire for self-rule and opposed to it, her helplessness keeps the play open for different interpretations, warning what can happen to a woman when she marries without appropriate consent. But feminist critics argue that she is a strong woman ahead of her time. While her rebellious spirit for autonomy is inspiring, her failure towards the end, is disheartening. Nanci Lamb Roider comments: "That the Duchess's life mirrors the plight of real seventeenth century women cannot be ignored, thus she serves not only as a role model, but also as a tragic reminder of the world in which she had to function" (Roider).

Summoned by the Duchess, when Antonio enters her room, he adopts his role as steward and she speaks to him gently about her will. He advises her to remarry and leave her everything to her new husband. She questions *all*. Meanwhile, he reveals that he is presently single and has no children. At this point, seeing his blood-shot eye, she presses the ring on Antonio asking him "never to part with it, / But to [her] second husband".

Ant. You have parted with it now.

Duch. Yes, to help your eyesight"

(I.i.406-10)

Apparently, Antonio doesn't realize the implication of her frivolous suggestion about curing his eyesight. As he seems blind to her feelings for him, probably she administers this ring to convince him to see her love better. Flabbergasted, when she finally puts the ring on his finger, he kneels before her. As a newly recruited steward he cannot be too sure and throughout the play Antonio's social position forces him to take a submissive role in regard to the Duchess's advances. His mediocre social rank is a pitiful match for her, which is probably the only valid objection the Aragonian brothers can have against him. In act three, one pilgrim is stunned that "so great a lady" has "match'd herself / Unto so mean a person" (III.iv.25-26). Antonio doesn't appear irrational as to be unaware of what is happening and becomes suspicious of her rather lunatic ambition. He realizes that the Duchess is a unique feminine power and her act of raising him from his knees is an indirect admission. Though the Duchess considers "now the ground's broke, / [he] may discover what a wealthy mine / [she] make [him] lord of" (I.i.429-31), still he upholds caution. On the contrary, she regrets she has to lead the wooing and continues saying that she looks for a "complete man" (I.i.435), who will "awake" (I.i.455) to discover the "wealthy mine" (I.i.430).

Suspecting transgression, Ferdinand has already called her "lusty widow" and she tells Antonio she is "a young widow / That claims you for her husband, and like a widow, I use but half a blush in't" (I.i.457-59). Even when she kisses him, Antonio is not reckless, but is rather cautious and doesn't forget to ask about her brothers (I.i.468). Sexually stimulated, she answers not to "think of them--/All discord, without this circumference, / Is only to be pitied, and not fear'd" (I.i.469-71). Antonio admits, "These words should be [his]" (I.i.473). In an excited moment, when she commands him to "Kneel," Cariola unexpectedly interrupts. Witnessing the courtship and secret marriage ceremony, her comment reveals the accepted opinion of the many around the Duchess, "Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman / Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows / A fearful madness; I owe her much of pity" (I.i.504-06). The response confirms she does not appreciate the Duchess's action in marrying Antonio secretly. Whatever governs the Duchess's action, Cariola sees in her mistress "A fearful madness" (I.i.506) and feels "much of pity" (I.i.506) for her. She judges love and madness to be the two sides of the same coin but arouses fear and pity. Sandra Clark remarks, ". . . although she allows that it could be the sign

of 'the spirit of greatness' equally well as of what is perhaps its opposite, the spirit of woman. Her response is that which Aristotle thought proper for a tragedy: pity and fear" (86).

Ferdinand is convinced that the sexual experience of the married life can even cause the same urge in the widowed state too: "You are a widow: You know already what man is" (I.i.293-34). The Duchess pleads with "youth /And a little beauty" (III.2.139-40) but demonstrates sexuality and verbalizes her lust: "What pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?" (III.ii.10). She dismisses the thought of her brothers and, before Cariola pledges and performs a wedding ceremony *per verba de presenti* in a romantic mood. John Russell Brown notes that such public solemnizing without the presence of the church was fornication and considered a sin (Brown 35). Though going against the dictates of the establishment for truth may appear as a virtue, it was socially condemnable during her time and she sounds hesitant to be reassured, "What can the church force more?" (I.i.488). Meanwhile, hot and looking forward to bed, the Duchess teasingly proposes Antonio to "Lay a naked sword between [them, to] keep [them] chaste" (I.i.501). Dr. Boklund has seen the sword as an ironic anticipation of the violence that will separate and kill them (Leech 14). The swift transition from recruiting Antonio, courtshipping and leading towards bed immediately after marriage is striking.

James L. Calderwood in the "*The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony*" remarked that many of Webster's critics have been unable to forgive him that his plays were not written by Shakespeare (103), but one can not ignore the similarity of Hamlet's realization "frailty thy name is woman" (I.ii.146) with what Ferdinand and the Cardinal conclude in the first act of *The Duchess of Malfi*. They build their argument on a common female fault: that women are all obsessed by lust, widows who remarry are not far from whores. Naturally shameless, women also neglect their status; and being weak in both mind and will, they surrender easily to amorous advances and sweet tales of courtship. Yet the Duchess's actions contradict this concept of widowhood. Antonio does not court the Duchess, rather the situation is reversed. The Duchess removes her wedding band and places it on Antonio's finger explaining her actions by protecting his worthiness and nobility: ". . . we are forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us; / And as a tyrant doubles with his words, / And fearfully equivocates, so we / Are forced to express our violent passions / In riddles and in dreams, and leave the

path / Of simple virtue, which was never made / To seem the thing it is not" (I.i.444-48). More to the point, her marriage with Antonio is comparatively cleaner than the Cardinal's faithless relationship with Julia and her solemnizing vows shows that she has moral standards to uphold.

Peter B. Murry in *A Study of John Webster* argues that though the contemporary audiences were opposed to such marriage but love and marriage of Antonio and the Duchess is presented sympathetically in the play. The stubbornly opposing brothers are devilish themselves and the Cardinal's amorous relationship with Julia goes against the stricture of priests' having to lead a celibate life. Antonio emerges as noble as the blood of the Duchess is. Modeled on the ideal of Christian gentility, "Antonio makes it plain that he loves her for her beautiful spirit and not only for her beautiful face" (171). Still the marriage is traditionally criticized on three counts: it is unequal, secret and a second marriage. The Jacobean society considered marrying out of class a social offense for a woman but was tolerant of a man marrying below himself sanctioning equivalent social status to his wife. A marriage like the Duchess's to a servant could cause resentment and uncertainty in the social hierarchy among the women of equal rank. Longing for a personal life through this marriage, the Duchess ignores public responsibility. Clifford Leech says that Webster makes it plain that in this marriage there is harm to public order, there is public disapproval, there is neglect of duty but within the play no evidence exists implying that

the Duchess uses her sexuality to further her political position. Rather, the Duchess uses her sexuality in order to distinguish a clear separation between her body natural and her body politic; a need for a private life separate from the political realm, a separation her corrupt brothers are unable to recognize. (52)

The marriage is offensive again for its private nature, providing Ferdinand somewhat a validity to call the Duchess's children "bastards" because, "the Council of Trent formalized the position of the Catholic Church; a promise or betrothal had no need of outside consent, witnesses or a priest for its validity. But such a union was not to be consummated until after a priest - administered sacramental act" (Sims 96). Being secret, it hides vital information from the state, essential for securing succession and social recognition for the children born out of

it. But Webster makes the audience anxious for the Duchess. While her pregnancy and childbirth is presented not as a natural and happy part of love and marriage, giving birth to the three children, the marriage becomes "bounteously fruitful and creative, a true source of life" (Murray 173).

By position and spirit, the Duchess is vigorous and plays a role, which in an equal marriage should be Antonio's. She overturns the traditional gender roles in which man takes the initiative in courtship. Her winning him violates the social and political restrictions that the noble blood needs to marry their equals. Through this wedding, the Duchess establishes her servant as her lord and master. Getting liberated from the medieval society's communal makeup, the idea of individualism was flourishing during the Renaissance, and it is an unusual sight where a woman is exercising male privileges. In "The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered," Barbara J. Todd notes that typically a married woman was legally and personally subject to her husband. A widow was free from such control. Even if she was poor, she was her own woman and could run her life as she saw fit... But the independent woman was also an anomaly. English patriarchal society required that, like the state, the household should be headed by a man. The woman heading her own household contradicted the patriarchal theory; the ungoverned woman was a threat to social order (55).

The play begins with the definition of a patriarchal society: "To a fixed order, their judicious king / Begins at home; quits first his royal palace / Of flattering sycophants of dissolute / And infamous persons-- which he sweetly terms / His Master's masterpiece, the work of heaven" (I.i.6-10). This means at the top reigned God, king and lord where women belonged to men's sphere of influence. From father they were passed into the hands of their husbands. The patriarchal theory fears feminine sexuality and it requires virginity as a precondition in the marriage. Otherwise, they would be labeled as 'tainted'. In defiance of this the Duchess is portrayed as being an anxious and loving mother to the children at the time of her death. She views them as heirs and not as mere commodities. "I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / say her prayers ere she sleep" (IV.ii.204-06).

The Duchess is recklessly impudent in her strength to remarry outside

the religious institution, choosing a husband, longing to live a life away from fame and to "put off all vain ceremony" (I.i.456). Marrying beneath the class simultaneously challenges the request of her brothers but preserves the right to rule herself. She proves herself more powerful than those who encircle her when most women found their identity in their husbands and families. From the uncertainty and emptiness of widowhood her remarriage offers meaning and a renewed sense of purpose. As Antonio's Duchess, she will always rule him. When she "chose a husband" she chooses it to be her steward and gives birth to the children hiding their existence from her monstrous brothers. When the concealment is exposed, she flees. On the other hand, another group of critics finds her situation to be absolutely vulnerable. They think she is known throughout the play with the title "the Duchess," which she would not have had were it not for her now-deceased first husband. She is praised for her audacity, desire, strength and infatuation but:

they have nearly universally failed to recognize that these traits were not simply desirable facets of her character, but were integral to her very survival. She is a completely isolated character, utterly alone in the world, associated with no female companions of her own rank. She is young, has lost her husband, has been left with a young son and daughter to raise, and has been forbidden by her brothers to remarry. Regarding her as a "strong" woman, considering her circumstances, is the least amount of credit one can give her. (Roider)

A female central character challenges the norms of the Renaissance culture in which the play was written. Though the Duchess is killed for her rebellious remarriage, Webster shows the power structures in a new, unfamiliar light where she is expected to be traditional to the patriarchal restrictions her two brothers place on her. She shows "a behavior so noble / As gives a majesty to adversity" (IV.i.5-6) but when her suppression becomes force, she no longer conforms. Towards the end, surrounded by the madmen and caught by vicious Bosola, when she realizes of achieving nothing from submission, the Duchess affirms her will directly, showing the uncompromising nature of her voice; "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.ii.142). Being a free-spirited personality, she places passion above reason but Webster depicts her as neither an ordinary nor a virtuous widow; she is what Robert Ornstein says in "Moral Vision in *The Duchess of Malfi*":

In temperament she is a heroine of Shakespearean romantic comedy, graceful, witty, wanton and innocent at the same time, who woos and wins her husband in spite of himself. She capriciously ignores the challenge of an aristocratic life, but the challenge of death--the supreme challenge in Jacobean tragedy--she accepts boldly and triumphantly. There is a beauty in her death that makes the ugliness of Ferdinand's life unbearable and that shakes the cynical nihilism which is Bosola's defense against conscience (71).

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In his introduction to *The Works of John Webster*, Alexander Dyce commented that "the passion of the Duchess for Antonio, a subject most difficult to treat, is managed with infinite delicacy; and, in a situation of great peril for the author, she [the Duchess] condescends without being degraded..." (38).³ She becomes a symbol of life in a sick, corrupted society where the good die with the bad and life is an endless struggle between right and wrong. Greatness is like an optical illusion, as cynical Bosola declares that "Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright, / But look'd to near, have neither heat nor light"(IV.ii. 144-45) but the audience see the light when Antonio's first-born son is restored "in's mother's right" (V.v.113). It nourishes the hope of that reformed order which Antonio had longed for in the first scene of the play.

Notes

- ¹ For all textual references to *The Duchess of Malfi*, I have used John Russel Brown's (1988) edition, published from the Manchester University Press.
- ² See Holdsworth, pp. 45-48.
- ³ See Holdsworth, pp. 37-38.

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