

Jennifer Hartshorn

May 7, 2001

Transgression and Punishment in *The Duchess of Malfi*

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster presents a tragic tale of betrayal, murder, black magic and madness, in which characters engage in practices that would place them far outside the accepted norm of Jacobean society. By putting these practices on display on the stage, Webster achieves the complimentary goals of creating an exciting play that would satisfy the appetite for spectacle of play-going audiences, while situating the transgressors in such a way that at the end of the play, the dominant paradigm is supported and those who transgress pay the ultimate price. However in depicting the Duchess as a martyr, Webster effectively pays lip service to the societal status quo while introducing doubt as to the legitimacy of any state that would enact such cruel punishments.

The Duchess is in a situation that would be seen as problematic in Jacobean society – at the start of the play she is a widow: a woman without a man. Since women's lives in this period could roughly be divided into periods of dependence on fathers, then husbands, then sons, a woman without a man was an anomaly. Of course, this was not to say that there were no widows or other women without male supervision, as it were – merely that it was unusual. Only childless widows typically owned property in their own right, however, and in a world where property equated to money and power, this was significant.

Furthermore, the Duchess holds noble title. At the time *The Duchess of Malfi* was first produced, the age of Elizabeth had passed, and the Queen of England held her title only by virtue of being the wife of the King of England, James I. The Duchess is a woman with land, title and power, who is not under the control of father, husband or son as the play begins. Callaghan explains the situation, stating, “Female rule undermined gender differentiation to such an extent that the sexual categorization of a female monarch became ambiguous”¹. As such, a female ruler at once became less “female” by virtue of assuming a traditionally masculine office, and simultaneously undermined the authority of her office with her femininity.

Regardless of whether or not she is a ruler, a woman without a man is a threat to the patriarchal culture upon which society is built, for even simply as head of the household she usurps a male role. In the absence of father, husband or son, the men closest to the Duchess are her brothers, the Duke and the Cardinal. They make their wishes clear, and yet she ignores the desires of her closest male relatives in order to pursue her heart’s desire – Antonio.

In order to restore the rightful order, the Duchess must marry. But when she does so, she again flaunts the dominant social system by marrying below her social station. Castruccio, an old Lord who may be seen to represent the conservative views of the nobility in such matters, states, “It is fitting a soldier arise to be a prince, but not necessary a prince descend to be a captain” (I.ii.14-15). Thus while those low-born may wish to achieve title, it is not fit that those with title debase themselves by descending to the level of those beneath them socially.

¹ Callaghan, 148.

Callaghan elucidates the situation further, stating, “the problem . . . is that the models of perfect sovereignty and perfect womanhood are diametrically opposed, an opposition which is accentuated when the Duchess . . . marries a servant, undermining differentiation at the levels of both gender and class”². The authority of office that is diluted once by virtue of her being female is further diminished when she breaks class boundaries by marrying outside her social stratum.

The Duchess correctly surmises that her brothers will be outraged at the notion of her marrying a servant, and seeks to conceal her marriage from them. This deceit, while certainly romantic and presented in such a way that generates sympathy for the lovers, is *also* an act against what was perceived as the societal order. By acting to deceive her closest male relatives – who are themselves a Duke and a Cardinal respectively, and as such temporal and spiritual authorities, whatever other flaws they may have, she further positions herself as deviant and outside the social norm.

Of course, when she gives birth, apparently out of wedlock to those unaware of her secret marriage, she again transgresses against the social order. In a society where the economy is based on primogeniture, the legitimacy of one’s children is of economic as well as merely social importance. Therefore it is no surprise that when her brother the Duke hears that she has given birth in act II, scene 5, he is outraged.

The scenes of the Duchess’s imprisonment and torture form the basis for some of the most disturbing and moving moments in English Renaissance drama. The Duchess has clearly transgressed, by disobeying her brothers’ wishes, by actively deceiving them,

² Callaghan, 150.

by marrying below her station and bearing children by a man not known to be her husband.

And as is the case in other contemporary dramas, whether the transgressor is Don John or Lady Macbeth, Faustus or Viola, the transgressor must be neutralized. Were *The Duchess of Malifi* a comedy, this could be achieved by settling the transgressor into an acceptable marriage, as is the case with Viola. Of course, the Duchess is already married – below her social station - and that disastrous arrangement is part and parcel of her guilt. Another alternative for those who disrupt the social order in a comedy would be banishment, as is the fate of Malvolio, Don John and others. But this is a tragedy, and the punishment for those who transgress – even those with whom we may sympathize, such as Romeo and Juliet, or Faustus – is death. Strong female figures – especially those in positions of authority - in late Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy have a particularly bad track record, as is demonstrated by Vittoria, Lady Macbeth, Gertrude and Cleopatra. The dramas of this period teach their audience that the fate of any woman who assumes power, particularly if she does so by flouting the power of men in authority, is death.

And yet even while Webster, through the character of the Duke, punishes the transgressor, he also shows her as a figure of strength and courage. Her bravery while imprisoned is remarkable and inspiring. What are we to make of this? Does Webster want us to sympathize with her, and therefore position the sympathies of the audience against the dominant social order? Here we see Webster, like More and Marlowe before him, dealing with a controversial subject in a way that raises questions, yet maintains plausible deniability. More could easily claim that he disagreed with the radical notions presented in *Utopia*, for it was presented as a fiction – and one in which More places

himself as a character, decrying the folly of the social paradise depicted. Marlowe, who himself was accused of heresy and atheism, could point to the fact that Faustus, the ultimate free thinker, died in the end and was consigned to hell as a way of denying that he sympathized with the aims of the good Doctor. Similarly, while Webster presents the Duchess in such a way that we may admire her strength, his treatment of the Duchess would no doubt satisfy the censor, for sympathy or no, she must and does die.

And so, with a fifth of the play yet to unfold, we have lost the title character. The focus now shifts to her twin brother, the Duke. Twins of opposite genders were used elsewhere in Renaissance drama to set up contrasts based on gender roles in society, as in *Twelfth Night*. Because twins presumably had similar advantages from birth and a similar upbringing in all ways save those relating to gender, they provide an ideal means of contrast. The notion of twins being interchangeable was often played with in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and while clearly the Duke and Duchess are not identical, either physically or in terms of personality and temperament, the peculiar bond of twins as two halves of a single whole is one that Webster utilizes to great effect. Following the murder of the Duchess in IV.ii, Duke Ferdinand states, “She and I were twins; / And should I die this instant, I had lived / Her time to a minute” – he is right, for though he lives on in body, his mind is shattered, and what time remains for him on earth will be marred by madness.

If the Duchess is a transgressor in terms of acting in ways inappropriate to her gender, the Duke manages to be far more socially and morally offensive in his own right. His incestuous attraction for his sister would be seen as inappropriate and un-Christian, to say nothing of the social and economic implications of marrying – or even “just” bedding

one's own sister. While Claudius was merely brother-*in-law* to Gertrude, the Duke is not only brother of the Duchess, but her twin. This makes his lust for her a kind of twisted narcissism, and therefore even more shocking and inappropriate.

While his imprisonment and even murder of his sister might be viewed as simply fate giving her her due, the zeal with which he attempts to break her spirit and her mind go far beyond what would be appropriate for a just ruler, or a loving sibling. By betraying his duty as a ruler and his duty as a brother in bringing about the destruction of the Duchess, the Duke positions himself outside societal norms. His attempts to drive her mad are a kind of theater of the grotesque, wherein he goes far beyond the right of a brother or even an agent of the law in his attempt to mete out a justice best reserved to God alone. His attempts backfire, of course, and in the final act we see the Duke driven mad himself, believing himself to be a werewolf. In a chilling turn of phrase, the doctor describes the Duke's "lycanthropy" in V.ii, recounting that the Duke, "said he was a wolf; only the difference / Was, a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside, /His on the inside." How many others, we may wonder, go about looking human, and yet hairy on the inside? This theme of corruption dominates the final act of the play.

Of all the forms madness can take, that Webster chooses lycanthropy, or the supposed disease that causes a person to turn into a werewolf, half man and half beast, is worth noting. Werewolves have long been associated with the moon, and with a changeable nature more often associated with women. In becoming a werewolf, the Duke has in some way become the mad beast he attempted to turn his sister into. The links to change and to the moon, an unpredictable nature and an inconstant heart, have the effect of imbuing the werewolf with qualities viewed by a Jacobean audience as

distinctly feminine, which further undermines Duke Ferdinand's authority as a male ruler. Smith equates lycanthropy with a dissolution of gender boundaries, and with a feminization of the Duke, stating that the play, "insists on conveying Ferdinand's feminization by implicitly allying his evil with witchcraft and by focusing on his lycanthropy in the later scenes."³

The dual nature of the werewolf is also worth noting, for just as the were-creature is half one thing and half another, the twin Duke and Duchess were likewise in many ways two halves of the same whole, each eternally struggling for dominance just as the man and wolf sides of the werewolf vie for control of a single body.

It is reasonable to question to what degree Renaissance playwrights were complicit or even conscious in their production of plays as a means to 'keep the man down' and support the dominant social paradigm. Coming several centuries before Foucault, it is safe to assume that most playwrights were more concerned with being paid for their efforts than they were about using the stage as a platform for social engineering. And yet competing factors were at work in the arena of English Renaissance drama production which achieved much the same result, regardless of the intent or complicity of the author in staging the spectacle of the scaffold.⁴

Certainly the culture of censorship in the world of Jacobean drama was a major factor in determining what themes and acts could be depicted on stage. Because all plays had to be approved by the Master of the Revels prior to production, the crown was able to censor themes and dialogue which were perceived as undermining the state in any way.

³ Smith, 85.

⁴ Foucault, 32.

This is not to say that nothing ever snuck past the censor; certainly some things did, either through a lack of diligence on the part of the Master of the Revels, or by simply making changes to the script for performance that were never officially approved or ratified. But for the most part, any company of players or playwright had to assume that any given script would come under close scrutiny prior to being approved for production – and that the penalty for producing an unapproved play could theoretically be that of treason, depending on the whim of the crown. The famous example of the would-be regicides who commissioned players to perform *Richard II* illustrates that drama could be used as a political tool, and the Crown was not unmindful of this.

Competing with the desire to produce a play which would be deemed appropriate by the censor – and therefore something that could be performed - was knowledge of the interests and tastes of the playgoing audience. Particularly during the reign of James I, there was a great desire for plays dealing with themes of witchcraft. *Macbeth* is often cited as a play written to help satisfy this craving, and the ongoing popularity of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* – and the additional revisions made to it during this time to help maintain its relevance – attest to the playgoing audiences' ongoing desire for both spectacle and pageantry as well as themes of witchcraft and general wickedness.

The Duchess of Malfi, of course, satisfies on all these counts. It is sensational, dealing with such lurid subject matter as secret marriages, concealed pregnancy, prophetic dreams, howling madness (literally, in the case of the lycanthropic Duke), poison and apparitions. The supernatural is present throughout the play, in the form of horoscopes, visions and dreams. Mebane suggests that drama of this period “typically

associates magic and sorcery with the subversion of proper order and with deception,”⁵ and Webster’s uses of the supernatural certainly bear this out, both in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. That which is super-natural is by definition outside the scope of the everyday, the real, the world as God first created it. For mortals to seek out the supernatural was to go against Divine Will. In a highly structured (and highly religious) society, where that which was outside the divine plan was seen as blasphemous and thus treasonous as well, the supernatural had connotations of the forbidden, the illicit – and, if the popularity of plays with magical themes is any indication, it was considered as thrilling as the proverbial forbidden fruit.

The “wild consort” of madmen sent to torment the Duchess in IV.ii could be seen as a kind of masque of the grotesque to Jacobean playgoers, much like the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins in *Doctor Faustus*, or the more stately march of the Scottish kings of the future in *Macbeth*. The spectacle of the grotesque presented, like a kind of danse macabre in which the madmen sing, dance and spout nonsense serves to disturb as well as delight, to remind those who see it of the fleeting nature of sanity just as the traditional danse macabre bid the watchers to remember their own mortality. Coming just prior to the death of the Duchess, it sits in a pivotal position in the play. The madmen, who are ultimately those who have left societal rules of decorum and logic far behind, serve as prologue to the ultimate lawlessness that is to follow: the murder of the Duchess, Cariola, and the children.

And while Foucault’s theories may not have been on the minds of Renaissance dramatists who lived and died some three and a half centuries prior to the twentieth

⁵ Mebane, 192.

century theorist, his insights can help to explicate the purpose for the scenes of torture that lie at the core of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Foucault states that, “in the ‘excesses’ of torture, a whole economy of power is invested,”⁶ and so it is with the Duke’s torment of the Duchess. Duke Ferdinand’s staging of public torture (for, while within the reality of the play it may not have an audience, within the reality of Jacobean society, or indeed modern society, it clearly does) serves to solidify the right of the state to mete out punishment against transgressors. And yet, in going far beyond what is justifiable or appropriate, he serves to depict a law turned upside down, and a ruler who has gone beyond what the audience would likely see as a just punishment. Smith’s research supports this view, stating, “As in other Renaissance tragedies, Webster’s play performs punishments on-stage as an enactment of patriarchally sanctioned authority but nevertheless demonstrates that enactors of violence such as Bosola frequently provoked not fear and anguish in their victims but contempt and pity.”⁷

In fact, Bosola himself notes at IV.ii.286-7, “The office of justice is perverted quite / when one thief hang another.” By making a mockery of justice, like a revenger who has no real reason to seek vengeance, Duke Ferdinand has turned the law on its head. Madness and death can be the only reward of one who stands first as an agent of the state and then violates the same rules he is supposed to uphold.

The Duchess, on the other hand, ends up not vilified but ennobled by her struggle. Foucault states that, “Indominability was an alternative claim to greatness: by not giving in under torture, [the accused] gave proof of a strength that no power had succeeded in

⁶ Foucault, 35

⁷ Smith, 37.

bending.”⁸ So while the Duchess’ “nobility” is undermined by her gender, her marrying outside her class and other actions, in the end her strength of will reveals a nobility of spirit independent of societal strictures. Rather than serving as an example of how not to act, the Duchess may be seen as a kind of martyr, her strength in the face of adversity serving to help her transcend her status as a breaker of rules and an outsider to her culture.

How might a playwright juggle the two conflicting desires – that of the audience for sex, violence and witchcraft, with that of the censor for upstanding moral dramas that would support the rule of law? Webster must find a way to present a strong title character – much as in any tragedy – who is at once flawed and inspiring, with whom we sympathize but whose death we must ultimately accept. Compound this with the need for playwrights to produce scripts at speed most modern writers would find alarming, and you have a tall order for any would-be playwright.

Fortunately for us, Webster was up to the task. In *The Duchess of Malfi* he presents a tale full of transgressors: strong women who chart their own destinies, murderers, black magicians, madmen, poisoners - to say nothing of the Pope, a baddie if there ever was one in Anglican England! - and others who would be seen as clearly outside the realm of acceptable behavior to a Jacobean censor, or audience. And yet, in the end, all those who go against the will of society are destroyed, providing the tragic closure necessary to ensure that all is right with the world by the end of the play. Those who transgress are punished, and yet as in any good tragedy, we feel a sense of loss, a regret that someone with whom we empathize and admire has been destroyed. By

⁸ Foucault, 67.

providing a platform – a scaffold, in Foucault’s paradigm – to those who break the rules, Webster gives a voice ennobled law-breakers, while maintaining plausible deniability about his support of their actions. Others who trespass against conventional notions of what is good and just, such as the Duke and Cardinal, are shown for the monsters they are.

Webster gives us a hero – or in this case, a heroine – with noble qualities who is nonetheless an outlaw. He likewise presents a villain whose evil corrupts himself and those around him until the only end can be death for all those involved. That the two are twins – the transgressor who is noble of spirit and the noble with a corrupt spirit – makes for an excellent contrast. Webster presents transgressors, both as figures to be admired, and despised, and causes the audience (or the reader) to question their own beliefs. Although ultimately those who go against society in any regard meet with death, in the end there is new hope in the person of the Duchess’ child, who may yet become Duke of Malfi and end the cycle of betrayal and madness.

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