

The Theme and Morality, Ethics of the Duchess of Malfi's Tragedy

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Abstract— In the Duchess of Malfi the tragic action once again appears to conclude with the death of the eponymous protagonist. Repeated prolepses have prepared us for just such a catastrophe, starting with the very first scene, where her brothers' lecture upon the iniquity of remarriage viciously inverts the familiar conceit of eroticised death-as-wedding to make the widow's marriage a kind of death. This one concludes with a mimesis of tragic closure, as Bosola, who earlier in the scene has brought the Duchess her coffin as 'a present from your princely brothers', begins the preparations for her funeral. As this chapter intends to show, the full significance of the Duchess's death is hardly comprehensible outside the context created by the fifth act, and in particular by the crucial third scene, in which Antonio and Bosola visit the site of her tomb.

Keywords— *Malfi, Tragic Action, Death, Mimesis, Tragic Closure, Duchess, Funeral*

I. INTRODUCTION

A novel is a long narrative, normally in prose, which describes fictional characters and events, usually in the form of a sequential story. The genre has also been described as possessing "a continuous and comprehensive history of about two thousand years". This view sees the novel's origins in Classical Greece and Rome, medieval, early modern romance, and the tradition of the novella. The latter, an Italian word used to describe short stories, supplied the present generic English term in the 18th century. Ian Watt, however, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) suggests that the novel first came into being in the early 18th century,

II. CHAPTER-1

A. Tragedy

Tragedy (from the Greek: tragōidia) is a form of drama based on human suffering that invokes an accompanying catharsis or pleasure in audiences. While many cultures have developed forms that provoke this paradoxical response, the term tragedy often refers to a specific tradition of drama that has played a unique and important role historically in the self-definition of Western civilisation. That tradition has been multiple and discontinuous, yet the term has often been used to invoke a powerful effect of cultural identity and historical continuity—"the Greeks and the Elizabethans, in one cultural form; Hellenes and Christians, in a common activity," as Raymond Williams puts it.

From its origins in the theatre of ancient Greece 2500 years ago, from which there survives only a fraction of the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; through its singular articulations in the works of Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Jean Racine, and Friedrich Schiller to the more recent naturalistic tragedy of August Strindberg; Samuel Beckett's modernist meditations on death, loss and suffering; Müller's postmodernist reworkings of the tragic canon; and Joshua Oppenheimer's incorporation of tragic pathos in his nonfiction film, *The Act of Killing* (2012), tragedy has remained an

important site of cultural experimentation, negotiation, struggle, and change. A long line of philosophers—which includes Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Voltaire, Hume, Diderot, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, Camus, Lacan, and Deleuze—have analysed, speculated upon, and criticised the genre.

In the wake of Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BCE), tragedy has been used to make genre distinctions, whether at the scale of poetry in general (where the tragic divides against epic and lyric) or at the scale of the drama (where tragedy is opposed to comedy). In the modern era, tragedy has also been defined against drama, melodrama, the tragicomic, and epic theatre. Drama, in the narrow sense, cuts across the traditional division between comedy and tragedy in an anti- or a-generic deterritorialisation from the mid-19th century onwards. Both Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal define their epic theatre projects (non-Aristotelian drama and Theatre of the Oppressed, respectively) against models of tragedy. Taxidou, however, reads epic theatre as an incorporation of tragic functions and its treatments of mourning and speculation.

B. Origin

The word "tragedy" appears to have been used to describe different phenomena at different times. It derives from Classical Greek τραγῳδία, contracted from trag(o)-aoidiā = "goat song", which comes from tragos = "he-goat" and aeidein = "to sing" (cf. "ode"). Scholars suspect this may be traced to a time when a goat was either the prize in a competition of choral dancing or was that around which a chorus danced prior to the animal's ritual sacrifice. In another view on the etymology, Athenaeus of Naucratis (2nd–3rd century CE) says that the original form of the word was trygodia from trygos (grape harvest) and ode (song), because those events were first introduced during grape harvest.

See also: English Renaissance theatre, Shakespearean tragedy, Revenge play, and Domestic tragedy

The common forms are the:

1. Tragedy of circumstance: people are born into their situations, and do not choose them; such tragedies explore the consequences of birthrights, particularly for monarchs
2. Tragedy of miscalculation: the protagonist's error of judgment has tragic consequences
3. Revenge play

In English, the most famous and most successful tragedies are those of William Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries. Shakespeare's tragedies include:

1. Antony and Cleopatra
2. Coriolanus
3. Hamlet
4. Julius Caesar
5. King Lear
6. Macbeth
7. Othello

8. Romeo and Juliet
9. Timon of Athens
10. Titus Andronicus
11. Troilus and Cressida

best there was" and mentions his two tragic plays by name.

A contemporary of Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, also wrote examples of tragedy in English, notably:

1. The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus
2. Tamburlaine the Great

John Webster (1580?–1635?), also wrote famous plays of the genre:

1. The Duchess of Malfi
2. The White Devil

III. CHAPTER-II

A. Reputation

Jhon Webster's major plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, are macabre, disturbing works that seem to prefigure the Gothic literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Intricate, complex, subtle and learned, they are difficult but rewarding, and are still frequently staged today.

Webster has received a reputation for being the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatist with the most unsparingly dark vision of human nature. Even more than John Ford, whose *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is also very bleak, Webster's tragedies present a horrific vision of mankind. In his poem "Whispers of Immortality," T. S. Eliot memorably says that Webster always saw "the skull beneath the skin".

On the other hand, Webster's title character in *The Duchess of Malfi* is presented as a figure of virtue by comparison to her malevolent brothers, and in facing death she exemplifies classical Stoic courage. Her martyr-like death scene has been compared to that of the titular king in Christopher Marlowe's play *Edward II*. Webster's use of a strong, virtuous woman as his central character was rare for his time and represents a deliberate reworking of some of the original historical event on which his play was based. The character of the duchess recalls the Victorian poet and essayist Algernon Charles Swinburne's comment in *A Study of Shakespeare* that in tragedies such as *King Lear* Shakespeare had shown such a bleak world as a foil or backdrop for virtuous heroines such as Ophelia and Imogen, so that their characterization would not seem too incredible. Swinburne describes such heroines as shining in the darkness.

B. Webster in other works

1. The eighteenth-century play *The Fatal Secret* by Lewis Theobald is a reworking of *The Duchess of Malfi*, imposing Aristotle's 'unities' and a happy ending on the plot.
2. The short story 'A Christmas in Padua' in F. L. Lucas's *The Woman Clothed with the Sun* (1937) retells the final hours in December 1585 of Vittoria Accoramboni (the original of Webster's *White Devil*), slanting the narrative from her perspective.
3. The 1982 detective novel *The Skull Beneath the Skin* by P. D. James centres on an ageing actress who plans to play Webster's drama *The Duchess of Malfi* in a Victorian castle theatre. The novel takes its title from T.S. Eliot's famous characterisation of Webster's work in his poem 'Whispers of Immortality'.
4. The song 'My White Devil' from *Echo & the Bunnymen's* 1983 album *Porcupine* refers to Webster as "one of the

IV. CHAPTER-III

A. Theme

The main themes of the play are: corruption, misuse of power, revenge, deception, the status of women and the consequences of their assertion of authority, the argument of blood v. merit, the upshot of unequal marriage, cruelty, incest, and class.

B. Characters

1. Antonio Bologna. Antonio has recently returned from France, full of scorn for the Italian courtiers whom he sees as more corrupt than the French. Antonio is the steward of the Duchess of Malfi's palace. His honesty and good judgment of character are characteristics well known to the other characters. He accepts the Duchess' proposal of marriage because of her disposition rather than her beauty. Her marrying beneath her status is a problem, however, and their marriage has to remain a secret, and Antonio shares neither her title nor her money. Bosola accidentally kills him.
2. Delio. A courtier, who tries to woo Julia. Based on Matteo Bandello's self-depiction under this name, his purpose is to be the sounding board for his friend Antonio. Because he asks so many pertinent questions, he serves as a source of important information to the audience, and is privy to the secrets of Antonio's marriage and children.
3. Daniel de Bosola. A former servant of the Cardinal, now returned from a sentence in the galleys for murder. Publicly rejected by his previous employer the Cardinal, he is sent by Ferdinand to spy on the Duchess as her Provisor of Horse. ^[Note 1] (Ferdinand hopes to keep her away from marriage.) Bosola is involved in the murder of the Duchess, her children, Cariola, Antonio, the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and a servant. Witnessing the nobility of the Duchess and Antonio facing their deaths, he finally feels guilty, and seeks to avenge them. This change of heart makes him the play's most complex character. A malcontent and cynic, he makes numerous critical comments on the nature of Renaissance society. (He is based on the historical Daniele de Bozolo, about whom little is known.)
4. The Cardinal. The brother to the Duchess and Ferdinand. A corrupt, icy official in the Roman Catholic Church who keeps a mistress — not uncharacteristic of churchmen at the time. He has arranged a spy (Bosola) to spy upon his sister — all this on the quiet, however, leaving others ignorant of his plotting. Of remorse, love, loyalty, or even greed, he knows nothing, and his reasons for hating his sister are a mystery. (Historically, his name was Luigi or Lodovico.)
5. Ferdinand. The Duke of Calabria and twin brother of the Duchess. Unlike his rational brother the Cardinal, Ferdinand is given to fits of rage and violent outbursts disproportionate to the perceived offence. He gradually loses his sanity—he believes he is a wolf and digs up graves—(lycanthropy), as a result of his regret for hiring Bosola to kill her. (In reality, his name was Carlo, Marquis of Gerace.)
6. Castruchio. An old lord. His name plays on the word "castrated", suggesting impotence. He's the conventional elderly man with a young, unfaithful wife (Julia). He is genial and easygoing, attempting to stay on good terms with all.

7. Roderigo. A courtier.
8. Grisolan. A courtier.
9. Silvio. A courtier.
10. Pescara. A marquis, possibly Fernando d'Avalos.
11. The Duchess. The protagonist, sister to Ferdinand and the Cardinal. At the beginning, she is a widow in the prime of her life. Though her brothers take every precaution to keep her from marriage, she secretly marries Antonio. Her brothers arrange to have her strangled. She is described as having a sweet countenance and noble virtue. Witty and clever, she can keep up with her brothers' banter. She also has a tenderness and warmth that they lack. She has three children, two sons and a daughter by Antonio. (There is an inconsistency surrounding earlier children by her deceased husband, put down to a careless mistake by Webster.)

V. CHAPTER-IV

The Duchess of Malfi takes place in Italy, mostly at the Duchess's palace in Malfi, in the sixteenth century. The Duchess is a young widow whose two brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, are visiting her from Rome at the play's start. Antonio, the manager of her household, has just returned from France. Before leaving the Duchess, Ferdinand engages Bosola, previously used by the Cardinal as a hit man, to ostensibly manage the Duchess's horses, but in reality to spy on her for the brothers so they can be sure she remains chaste and does not remarry. Bosola is reluctant, but eventually agrees.

Before they return to Rome, Ferdinand and the Cardinal lecture the Duchess about the impropriety of remarriage. She insists that she has no plans for remarriage, and shows some irritation at their attempts to control her. However, as soon as they leave, she sets in motion a plan to propose to Antonio with the help of her maid, Cariola. Antonio and the Duchess marry, and the Duchess reassures Antonio that they will find a way to appease her brothers.

Act Two is set about nine months later. The Duchess is pregnant and Bosola, suspecting her condition, hatches a plan to prove it to himself by giving her apricots, thought to induce labor. She accepts them, and immediately becomes ill, rushing off to her bedroom. Antonio and Delio discuss how to keep her labor secret.

Bosola now assumes his belief is correct, but finds further definitive proof through a horoscope Antonio wrote for the infant. With the information confirmed, Bosola he writes a letter to the Duchess's brothers to tell them the news. The brothers are both incensed, but the Cardinal maintains a cool calm, whereas Ferdinand grows erratically angry. Neither of them realizes that she is married, and hence assume the baby is a bastard. Ferdinand says he won't take any action until he knows who the baby's father is.

Act Three begins about two years later, with Delio's return to the Duchess's palace. Antonio and the Duchess have had two more children in the meantime. Ferdinand has recently arrived, and both Antonio and Delio suspect that he knows about the Duchess's children. Ferdinand surprises the Duchess in her bedroom, and when she tells him that she is married, he tells her she should never reveal to him the name of her lover lest terrible violence then be unleashed on all of them. He further banishes her forever from his sight.

The Duchess, who wishes to protect Antonio by removing him from Malfi, falsely claims he has stolen from her and hence

has him banished to Ancona. Once he has left, Bosola defends his virtue to the Duchess so emphatically that she admits the secret of their marriage. Bosola pretends to support her, and she sends him after Antonio with money and news that she will soon follow him. In Ancona a few days later, the Cardinal catches up to them and banishes the Duchess and her family from there.

On their way out of town, Bosola brings her an ostensibly forgiving but actually threatening letter from Ferdinand, and so the Duchess, fearing an ambush, tells Antonio to separate from her with their oldest son. Immediately after they part, Bosola and a group of soldiers take the Duchess and her two remaining children captive and bring them back to her palace.

In Act Four, Bosola tells Ferdinand that the Duchess is bearing her imprisonment nobly, which angers him. In an effort to make her insane with despair, he presents her with wax corpses of her family to convince her they have died. Though Bosola pleads with Ferdinand to cease his torture, he won't listen, and instead sends a group of madmen to torment her. Bosola returns, disguised as a tomb-maker, and prepares the Duchess for her impending death. Executioners follow with a cord to strangle her, but the Duchess remains steadfastly calm and courageous, at peace with the idea of rejoining her family, who she still believes are dead. They strangle her.

Bosola next orders her children and Cariola killed. Cariola pleads for her life, to no avail. When Ferdinand confronts the Duchess's body, he is suddenly overtaken with remorse and angry at Bosola for following his orders. He not only betrays Bosola by refusing the latter a promised reward, but also shows signs of insanity before he exits. The Duchess shows a final sign of life, and before she truly dies, Bosola tells her that Antonio is still alive. Bosola shows genuine sadness when she dies.

In Act Five, Antonio, ignorant of his wife and children's deaths, plans to beg the Cardinal that night for reconciliation. Ferdinand has now completely lost his mind and is afflicted with lycanthropy, or the belief that he is a wolf.

Bosola arrives and the Cardinal pretends that he has no idea about the Duchess's death. He offers Bosola a great reward for the murder of Antonio, an offer Bosola accepts even though he is plotting revenge. Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, approaches Bosola, declaring her love for him, and Bosola uses her to get the Cardinal to admit his involvement in the Duchess's murder.

After the Cardinal kills Julia, Bosola reveals he has overheard the secret and demands his reward killing the Duchess. The Cardinal, once again, promises it will come after he has killed Antonio and helped him get rid of Julia's body. Bosola pretends to agree, but tells the audience that he will find Antonio to either protect him or help him get his vengeance against the Cardinal and Ferdinand.

The Cardinal tells his courtiers to stay away no matter what they hear from him or Ferdinand, ostensibly because Ferdinand's madness gets worse when people are around, but actually because he wants privacy with which to dispose of Julia's body. Bosola, waiting outside the Cardinal's room, accidentally kills Antonio, who has come to see the Cardinal. Distraught, he goes into the Cardinal's room and attacks him.

Because of the Cardinal's warning, his courtiers at first ignore his cries for help. Ferdinand joins the fray and stabs both the Cardinal and Bosola. Bosola kills Ferdinand. The courtiers finally enter in time to see the Cardinal and Bosola die, but not before the latter has confessed the particulars of the situation.

Delio enters with Antonio and the Duchess's oldest son, who is the sole survivor of the family. Delio and the courtiers promise to raise the boy as a legacy to his parents, which gives the play a final glimmer of hope.

"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)

These lines, spoken by Bosola early in the first act, are the audience's introduction to the characters of the Cardinal and Ferdinand. They also offer significant insight into Bosola's motivations. Though the metaphor Bosola uses for the brothers is about trees and fruit, it is clear that these are not life-sustaining, sustenance-giving natural objects. Instead, not only are the trees themselves "crooked," or corrupt, but they are surrounded by "standing pools"--stagnant, putrid water. Because of this, what good they could offer--the fruit that they are "o'erladen with," essentially money and power--is available only to those comfortable in such foul surroundings.

I Pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy

Some syrup foe his cold, and let the girl

Say her prayers, ere the sleep. (iv. ii. 202-4)

CONCLUSION

Webster is interested in exploring the connection between love and violent sexual jealousy by locating the homicidal jealousy in a brother's yearning for his sister he compounds our awareness of the dark side of sexual desire, the potential for certain species of love to explode into violence. In Ferdinand, Webster presents us with another form of forbidden love and allows us to explore the relationship between love and death from the perspective of the villain.

Brecht's particular interest in Ferdinand's illicit sexual desires points to one of the reasons for our continued fascination with this play. The establishment of Freudian psychoanalysis in the course of the twentieth century brought with it a model of the human psyche which sees unruly repressed desires and impulses as exerting a powerful influence on human behaviour. Webster's characterisation of the Duke of Calabria as a man in the grip of unconscious and taboo erotic longings meshes with a modern conception of the instability and irreducible complexity of the human personality. Having said that, there is every indication that Webster's contemporaries found Ferdinand equally compelling; the role was originally played by Richard Burbage, the great tragic actor of the King's Men who had created the roles of Shakespeare's tragic heroes Hamlet, King Lear and Othello. That Burbage played Ferdinand as well suggests that the character was seen as the principal male role in the first productions of the play.

We have looked in this course at how Webster situates his forbidden cross-class marriage within a very particular dramatic context, thereby stimulating a sympathetic response towards the lovers who flout the dictates of the arbitrary aristocratic power embodied by the Cardinal and Ferdinand.

WORK CITED

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B. Secondary Source

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