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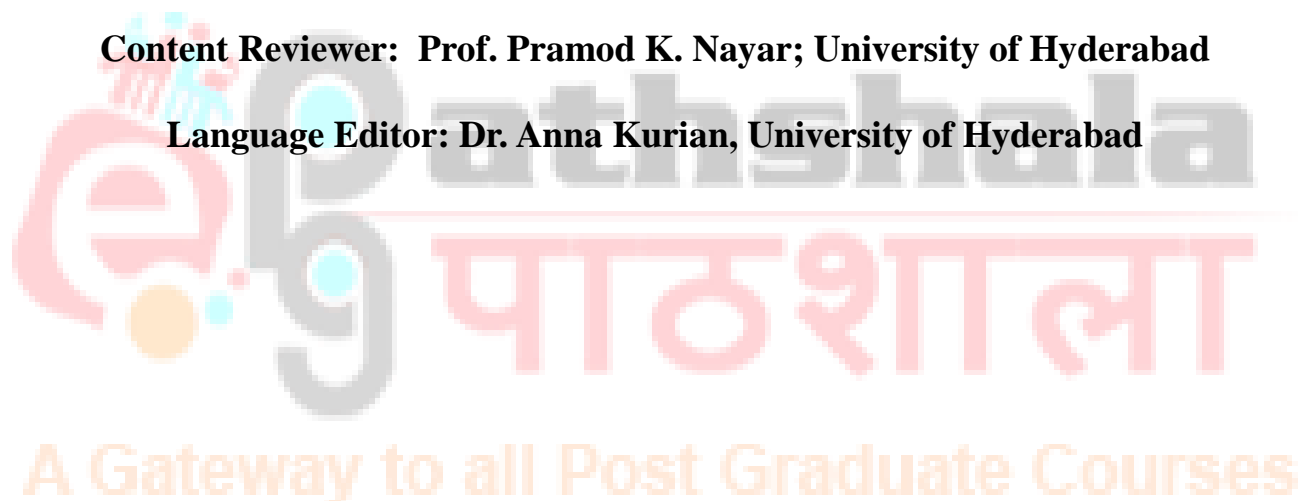
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Module No 10: John Webster: *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Section 1: The Jacobean and their Drama

The Jacobean World

With the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, the English throne passed to James I. The Jacobean (meaning of-James: the Latin version of James is Jacob) period in English literature lasted through his reign, to 1625. Jacobean drama, therefore, is contiguous with and grew out of the flourishing Elizabethan theatre. Some of Shakespeare's later plays (*Macbeth* for example) are technically Jacobean, not Elizabethan. The Jacobean theatre tradition was indebted to the theatrical innovations of Shakespeare and his generation. Its theatre had a flexible voice that ranged from broad satire to bloody revenge tragedies of the kind Webster would become synonymous with.

The historical events of James I's reign marked several turning points in English history. For one, James was already the king of Scotland (he was the fourth Scottish James) when he was crowned in England. England and Scotland were unofficially united by James' coronation to both thrones. Under James, imperialism continued rampant, and the first British colonies in America were founded and settled. Domestically, the English renaissance was a period of great growth, but also political unrest. Under Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, England had broken away from the Roman Catholic Church. The new Church of England had the English monarch as its head. The removal of the Church as an alternate centre of power, and the persecution of Catholics, who continued to owe spiritual allegiance to Rome, gave the Tudor and subsequent rulers an unprecedented amount of power. The repercussions of this were felt through the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. On the one hand James gives his name to the now-standard translation of the bible into English that he authorised; on the other, it was during his reign that, on the 5th of November 1605, a group of disaffected Catholics led by Guy Fawkes, attempted to blow up the King and the Parliament.

London, where Webster lived all his life, was the centre of the Jacobean political and mercantile worlds. It was perhaps not surprising that the theatre of the time was an important player in both political and the commercial terms. The royalty kept a jealous – and over the course of the seventeenth century, censorious – eye on the theatre (the names of theatre groups like The King's men indicate their chief patron); on the other, its sheer popularity made it a money-making enterprise. Fledgling colonialism was beginning to effect changes in the kinds of settings and characters used.

Jacobean Language

In this environment, Elizabethan and Jacobean English was a language undergoing rapid development and expansion. Playwrights coined new terms (Shakespeare is said to have contributed hundreds of new words to the language, in addition to expanding the usages of hundreds of extant ones) and adapted old ones to suit the occasion. Sentiments, phrases, and sometimes entire lines could be borrowed from older writings – the Latin classics in the case of writers like Jonson and Chapman – and from street slang or local dialects as in the plays of Middleton, Dekker and Fletcher. Terms were borrowed from different fields, including alchemy, geography, the law, metaphysics, and the court. The ambiguous nature of words made the Elizabethan stage rife with puns, and other kinds of dexterous verbal plays. Older poetic devices of alliteration and allusion were also in use. The wide-open nature of the language meant that writers each developed their own idiosyncrasies of syntax and meaning. They weren't above using each other's structures and lines either. Many of Webster's lines can be traced to other writers.

This flexibility of language also meant a flexibility of the form: plays often mixed verse and prose, as *The Duchess of Malfi* does. The verse was also variable – blank verse was popular, but the poetry could also take the form of a couplet, or stanzas, or lyrics to be set to music. In the scene when she is about to be strangled, for example, the Duchess speech is poetic, some of the lines even rhyming.

Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

Elizabethan drama is at the cusp of the Renaissance, as the mediaeval allegorical plays and Miracle plays, and characters who were types and humours gave way to a more complex, humanist theatre, with characters who function as distinct individuals. The elaborate moral messages gave way to nuanced plots and characters. With the Jacobean, this theatre becomes more formalised and polished – some of Shakespeare's most complex plays including *King Lear* (1603) and *The Tempest* (1614) were written during this time. Among Webster's contemporaries were Ben Jonson, John Marston, George Chapman, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont.

The political events of the time did leave their mark upon the theatre. Alan Sinfield, for example, reads in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1603) a reflection of several contrasting Jacobean ideas upon the nature of power and kingship, on who deserves to rule, and how their power is maintained. And *The Tempest* is frequently regarded as among the earliest colonial texts. Popular playwrights of the time

could usually turn their hand at various genres – historicals, comedies, satires, and tragedies.

Many of the older theatrical forms like Miracle plays, co-existed with this new plot-driven drama. Pageants and masques were also very popular – masques were usually designed for specific occasions; they were elaborate set-ups that ended with the entrance of the King or Queen, taking up their rightful place in court, establishing order. Many playwrights incorporated elements of these into their plays. In *The Tempest*, Prospero conjures up a full-scale masque within the play. Other dramas also incorporated music and dancing, and even funeral processions. Clowns and dumb-shows often found a place in the theatre as well, giving the audience a change of pace between emotionally heightened or poetically taxing scenes. Playwrights sometimes used these forms for macabre effect, as in the masque of the madmen in the *Duchess of Malfi*, or the mournful song that precedes the Duchess's murder.

Revenge Tragedies

Tragedies of all kinds were popular in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, but revenge tragedies occupied a specific and blood-soaked niche. In a world where public whippings and beheadings were still common, revenge tragedies, however gruesome, were a favourite among the Jacobeans. They were first popularised by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which is thought to have been composed in the 1580s or 90s.

Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* and Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (till recently it was thought to have been by Tourneur, but Middleton's authorship is now generally accepted) set the pattern for the genre. Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1600) was another popular Jacobean revenge tragedy. The plays contrived to close in on their villain, over the course of the narrative, hoisting him on his own petard. Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists often drew upon the work of the Roman playwright Seneca for their revenge plays. Seneca's Stoic philosophy sometimes influences the behaviour of the protagonist – the Duchess of Malfi's calmness and fatalism in the face of her misfortunes are diametrically opposed to her brothers' reactions when faced with their deaths. Bosola, too, by the end of the play, talks of his fundamental inability to control his own fate, much as he would like to.

As in Webster's plays, the Italian court was a common setting for elaborate plots that were moved forward by overweening ambition and lust, and ended with most of the characters violently dead.

The opulence and sophistication of courtly life set off the lurid and primitive violence of the characters. This setting also allowed the playwrights to question the pillars of the feudal state, getting in the kind of digs about the corruption of court life and the greed of the nobility that would have been impossible if its subjects were closer home.

Webster's revenge plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, both have a basis in history. The horrors in *The Duchess of Malfi* are subtler than those of the older revenge tragedies – reflections, visions, echoes, and imaginings.

Section 2: John Webster (1580? - 1634?)

Not much is known of Webster's life – even his date of birth is conjecture. What is known is that by 1602, Webster was sufficiently established as a playwright to be working with several well-regarded playwrights in London. Among his collaborators were Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, and Michael Drayton.

In 1604 and 1605 he wrote, with Thomas Dekker, two satirical comedies, *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho*. *Westward Ho* was well-received – enough to inspire the writing of an equally satiric reply by Ben Jonson, George Chapman (remembered in Keats' poem 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer') and John Marston called *Eastward Ho*. The three playwrights were thrown in jail, because some of the play's anti-Scottish remarks offended the king, giving it even greater notoriety. *Northward Ho* was Dekker and Webster's answer to this. Webster was thought to be, at the time, Dekker's junior partner in writing.

He began to make his own reputation over the next few years, notably with the two plays for which he is still best-remembered – *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), both dark and brooding tragedies. *The White Devil* was first performed by the Queen's Men at the Red Bull theatre in 1612, and did not fare too well, to Webster's disappointment. *The White Devil's* plot is based on the murder and trial of a sixteenth-century Italian lady named Vittoria Accoramboni. In Webster's hands, the murder becomes a part of a corrupt and sinister world, where violence lurks constantly.

The Duchess of Malfi was presented by the King's Men (Shakespeare's company) in 1613 or '14, in

the outdoor public theatre The Globe and the indoor venue, Blackfriars. Unlike its predecessor, it was instantly popular (perhaps due to its success at the indoor venue) and has been frequently revived in performance ever since. Based on historical events, it took its plot from an episode in William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1567), which Webster added to greatly.

Next, he is thought to have written a play called *The Guise*, which has been lost. Webster's last individual play was *The Devil's Law Case*, performed by the Queen's Men around 1619. As with *The White Devil*, Webster used his knowledge of the law and of trial scenes to great effect.

After that he collaborated on a few more plays including *The Late Murder of the Son upon the Mother* (1624) with Dekker, Ford and Rowley, *A Cure for a Cuckold* (1625) with Heywood and others, and a pageant called *Monuments of Honour* (1624).

Webster was married Sara Peniall, and their eldest son John was born in 1606. He is thought to have had at least five children (as of 1617). He seems to have had a parallel career as a businessman: in 1615 he became a freeman of the Merchant Taylor's Company, as his father was before him. He is thought to have died between 1632 and '34. Webster's career as solid businessman and writer of horrific plays gives us a fair notion of the London society of his day. Dollimore and Sinfield observe that “His whole background and career belie any idea that there was, necessarily, an opposition between business and the theatre, and, necessarily, something disreputable about playwriting.” (x)

Section 3: *The Duchess of Malfi*, Acts I-III

Act I

The play opens with Antonio, the Duchess's steward, returning from France. He is greeted by his friend Delio. Their conversation lays out the theme that will be picked up on and refined over the course of the play – the idea of nobility, the role of the royal court. Antonio compares it to a 'common fountain' that sets the tone of the people of the kingdom. Antonio himself is a commoner.

Next we meet Bosola, who is immediately identified as unpleasant and the Cardinal, one of the Duchess' brothers. Their mutual contempt established, the Cardinal exits, leaving Bosola to describe him and his brother Ferdinand as “crooked” and evil – but rich and powerful. Bosola's speech is

delivered in choppy prose, echoing the suppressed violence of his words. When he leaves, Delio tells Antonio that Bosola spent seven years in the galleys for murdering someone on the Cardinal's orders.

The Duchess' other brother, her twin Ferdinand the Duke of Calabria, appears next. He is accompanied by some other courtiers and attendants, including Castruchio. If the Cardinal is short and brusque, Ferdinand is shown to be both humourless and inclined to expect his courtiers to be his toadies. "Laugh when I laugh," he tells them (I. ii. 47).

It is only now the other characters have been established, that we meet the Duchess. With her are Cariola, her waiting woman, and Julia who is married to Castruchio and the Cardinal's mistress. The Duchess agrees to hire Bosola as the Master of the Horse in her court – as soon as she leaves, we find Ferdinand hiring him to spy on her.

When Ferdinand gives him money, Bosola's reply is full of self-loathing: "Whose throat must I cut?" (I. ii. 176) The parallels between Antonio and Bosola run through the play. Like Antonio, Bosola is a commoner who depends upon the nobility for his living; they are both independent-minded and full of political opinions. But while Antonio has been lucky to be employed by a lady he admires and who values him, and with whom he eventually builds a family, Bosola must earn his money, and try for a place in the world from masters he dislikes and mistrusts.

Ferdinand and the Cardinal then take their leave of the Duchess, with a long, joint speech against any idea of her remarrying. They speak alternately, barely allowing her to reply, finishing each others lines with vehemence, before the Cardinal goes off. Faced with only her twin, the Duchess remarks: "I think this speech between you both was studied,/ It came so roundly off." (253-54)

When they leave, the Duchess – perhaps on the spur of the moment, perhaps not – decides to get married, confiding in her waiting-woman, Cariola.

When Antonio enters, the Duchess banter with him, woos him, and asks him to marry her. Antonio is hesitant, because of his inferior social standing – "O my unworthiness!" he exclaims (353) – but is soon overcome by the Duchess' enthusiasm. He tries to pull back one last time, asking about her brothers. The Duchess dismisses them, drawing a firm line between her private life and her public one:

Do not think of them
All discord without this circumference

Is only to be pitied, and not fear'd.
Yet should they know it, time will easily
Scatter the tempest. (389-93)

Antonio's reply emphasises how the traditional gender roles are reversed in their relationship (and will continue to be): "These words should be mine," he notes (393), but gives in. With Cariola and witness, they agree to married, and the words are legally binding. They banter back and forth, using various images ('the spheres', 'soft music', 'loving palms') to describe their love.

The act ends with Cariola, who fears what the Duchess' impulsive behaviour will lead to, and pities her.

Act II

Act II takes place some months later. Since the characters have been established in the first act, the pace is swift. The Duchess and Antonio have kept their marriage private from everyone except Cariola and Delio. It begins with Bosola accosting a mid-wife. He is suspicious that the Duchess is pregnant, and gets her apricots, which were believed to affect pregnant women. Sure enough, the Duchess seems to feel instantly ill and hurries away to her bedroom – she has gone into labour.

His suspicions confirmed, Bosola harries the mid-wife again, but he is interrupted by a commotion. Needing to keep everyone away from the Duchess, Antonio puts out that a Switzer, a Swiss mercenary soldier, was found in the Duchess' bedroom – and that a lot of jewels and plate have been stolen. He asks that all the gates be shut, and that the members of the household be locked into their own rooms, and the keys be given to him for the night, until the matter is settled.

Cariola comes in and tell Antonio privately that the Duchess has given birth to a baby boy.

Later in the night, Bosola enters a room in the palace to snoop around – he heard a woman scream earlier and suspects that Antonio's reason for locking up the household was a lie. Antonio finds him there. They are hostile, each suspecting the other – quite accurately – of lying; Antonio's speeches are full of suspicious asides. When Antonio leaves, Bosola finds he has dropped a piece of paper. It is his son's horoscope, dating precisely the date and time of his delivery. Since Antonio's marriage to the Duchess is private, Bosola takes the child to be a bastard, and wonders who is father is. He decides to send a message to Ferdinand and the Cardinal with an old lord named Castruchio who is

leaving for Rome – taking a moment to gloat over how angry this message will make his masters.

The scene shifts to Rome, where the Cardinal is with his mistress, Julia, who has tricked her husband Castruchio to be with the Cardinal. Their flirtation is very different from that of the Duchess and Antonio – the Cardinal's attempts at lightness come off acid; he names Julia false and inconstant, and seems to hold all women in dislike and contempt. Delio enters with money for Julia – he is an old suitor of hers. Their joking around is interrupted by a servant, who comes to tell Julia that her husband is in town, delivering a letter that put Ferdinand “out of his wits” (ii. iv. 69). Delio, knowing that Castruchio has come from Malfi, deduces that the Duchess' brothers have learned of her marriage to Antonio.

Next, we see Ferdinand and the Cardinal with the letter. Ferdinand rants, declaring himself as mad as he appears, cursing his sister and dreaming up various violent reprisals he would like to take. Quite as furious as Ferdinand, the Cardinal is colder, more composed. He tries to quiet his brother, shushing him and trying to get him to quieten. Finally he gives up and exits, leaving the stage to Ferdinand, who vows violence upon his sister as soon as he knows the name of her lover.

Act III

Act III opens some years later, with Delio's return to Malfi. Antonio tells him that he and the Duchess have had two more children. Delio asks immediately if the Cardinal knows. Antonio reveals that matters are not yet out in the open, but he suspects the Duchess' brothers are aware that something is going on, for Ferdinand has just arrived at her court, and is acting uncharacteristically quiet. We learn that the people of the duchy have begun to whisper about the Duchess's morals, calling her a strumpet; and that the rumours also talk about Antonio's new-found power, suspecting him of corruption.

Meanwhile Ferdinand meets the Duchess and says he wants to arrange for her to marry a count named Malateste. The Duchess refuses lightly, mocking Malateste, but doesn't tell Ferdinand about her marriage immediately. Instead, she tries to bring up the rumours about her supposed lovers. Ferdinand dismisses them, and she leaves. Alone with Bosola, he demands to know more about her affairs. Bosola can only tell him that rumour says she had three children, but makes no mention of their father. He has, however, managed to get a copy of the key to the Duchess' bedroom.

The next scene shifts to this room. Antonio, Cariola and the Duchess banter light-heartedly. Antonio and Cariola sneak out of the room when the Duchess is in the middle of a speech, hoping to annoy her when she realises they've gone. Instead, as she combs her hair and muses aloud about the danger from her brothers, she suddenly find Ferdinand reflected in it, holding a poinard (a kind of long slim knife), which the Duchess takes.

In the scene that follows, her gentle composure, and reasonable replies contrast with Ferdinand's wild raving. She tells him she is married, and her children are legitimate – but Ferdinand continues to denounce her in every possible way. She stands her ground, until he leaves declaring that he will never see her again.

When Antonio and Cariola return, having realised that something is wrong, the Duchess describes Ferdinand as an apparition. Antonio is full of anxiety, but the Duchess has already decided what to do – Antonio must leave. Bosola enters to tell her that Ferdinand has gone to Rome, saying she is “undone”. The Duchess is calm. She uses the rumours to her advantage: she *is* undone, she tells Bosola, but because Antonio has been embezzling her money. When Bosola leaves the Duchess uses their last private moment to tell Antonio to run away to Ancona. She tells him to take her jewellery, which they earlier claimed was stolen.

In front of the rest of the household, the two of them enact a scene in which Antonio is denounced and sacked. Later, Bosola defends Antonio's honesty, and makes a speech describing the nobility of his character, even though he was a commoner. Won over by his praise of Antonio, the Duchess confesses to Bosola that she agrees with him, and is in fact married to Antonio. Bosola is taken at the thought that she married Antonio “merely for worth without these shadows/ of wealth and painted honours” (280-1) The Duchess then takes Bosola completely into her confidence, asking him to take charge of delivering her jewels to Antonio, and telling him that she will follow. They decide that she will give out that she is leaving on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Loretto, near Ancona, and thus meet Antonio. Bosola is left on stage to rue the fact that he is being paid to betray this information to the Cardinal.

The next scene is in Rome. The Cardinal has been asked by the Emperor to join a military campaign. He and Malateste are planning it when Bosola enters with his news. Ferdinand, Bosola and the cardinal talk apart, while the other men (Delio among them) talk, noting Ferdinand's building rage. Ferdinand's laugh interrupts the proceedings, and the Cardinal says he'll go to Ancona and use his political influence to deal with the Duchess.

The play shifts to the shrine in Ancona. The Cardinal ceremonially removes his priestly robes and hat, and instead puts on the sword, helmet and shield of a soldier. He takes the Duchess' wedding ring off her finger, and banishes her and her family from the shrine they have come to worship at. The scene is performed to a song, without a word being uttered by the main characters. Instead, it is bookended by conversations among pilgrims who discuss what they have just witnessed.

Outside, Bosola approaches the Duchess' party, which consists of her, Antonio, their children, Cariola, and a couple of other servants. He has a letter from Ferdinand, demanding she send Antonio to him, and full of vague threats: "I want his head," it says (III. v. 27) and later, "I had rather have his/ heart than his money" (34-35).

The Duchess urges Antonio to leave for Milan with their eldest son. They have just left when Bosola enters with an armed guard, their faces hidden by visors. Learning they are from her brothers she grows resigned – though she does get in a jibe at Bosola's "counterfeit face" (117). Bosola is full of self-loathing; his earlier thawing towards the Duchess seems to grow as they talk.

Section 4: *The Duchess of Malfi*, Acts IV and V

Act IV

Act IV opens with Ferdinand and Bosola. The latter's earlier grudging appreciation of the Duchess has developed into full-scale admiration. He praises her nobility, her majesty, her loveliness, even – ironically since he's talking to the half-mad Ferdinand – her restraint. Ferdinand sees in her composure only her disdain and curses her.

Bosola tells the Duchess that Ferdinand wants to visit her, but in darkness, since he has sworn not to see her. The lights are taken away, and Ferdinand enters, still railing against the Duchess, her marriage, and her children. Morbidly, he gives her a dead man's hand with her ring upon it. The Duchess' calm once more serves to highlight Ferdinand's madness. "I affectionately kiss it," she says. (IV. I. 44) Unable to draw any further reaction from her, Ferdinand leaves and the lights are returned.

Bosola reveals to her another of Ferdinand's cruel tricks – wax figures of Antonio and her children, arranged to appear dead. He tells her that's where the hand came from. Thinking they have all been killed, the Duchess' composure breaks. She starts to rue her misfortunes and begins to contemplate death. Bosola urges her not to despair.

When he and Ferdinand meet next, he asks Ferdinand to stop tormenting his sister. Ferdinand's own madness is too far gone to listen, and he is full of plans to further mortify the Duchess. His reply places blood (his own) above all other considerations: “That body of hers,/ While that my blood ran pure in't, was more worth/ Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call'd a soul.” (119-121) Bosola wants to stop seeing the Duchess, whom he spied upon and betrayed, but Ferdinand insists. He also adds that Bosola must soon go to Milan and kill Antonio.

The next scene is one of Ferdinand's torments: he has arranged for what is a kind of masque, a group of madmen who will sing and dance and rave at the Duchess. They are each drawn from a different profession, a servant informs the Duchess – a priest, a doctor, a lawyer, an astrologist, a tailor, an usher, a farmer, an so on. The madmen talk and sing a melancholy song. The Duchess seems unmoved – it is as if after the deaths of her family, Ferdinand's tricks no longer touch her.

When the madmen leave, Bosola comes in. True to his word, he is in disguise, so she doesn't know him. He is dressed as an old man, heralding her death. Her life has been destroyed, but the Duchess holds on to her position despite the loss of her power, her family, and her freedom. Even though she is to die, she calls herself the Duchess, and not by her name. Indeed, her name – historically Giovanna – is never mentioned in the play. Bosola's words are a recognition that the power he coveted so much at the beginning of the play, is a harsh thing – he says that she must indeed be a “great woman” (IV. ii. 140) for she looks tired and haggard, old before her time, and distraught.

Executioners arrive with bells and cords to kill the Duchess. Cariola is forced out; the Duchess' last words to her betray the fact that she is deeply disturbed even though she is talking calmly: she asks Cariola to look after the children whom she believes dead. When Cariola is gone, the Duchess faces Bosola stoutly, saying she is afraid neither of death, nor of strangling. After all her brothers have done, death is the “best gift” they can give her (229). She asks only that when she is dead, her body be given to her women.

Even in this she is betrayed, for as soon as she is dead, Cariola is brought in and strangled, struggling, arguing and damning the killers as long as she can. The children too are killed.

Ferdinand enters to see their corpses. It is the Duchess' body that really affects him. Ferdinand now turns upon Bosola, blaming him for obeying his orders and killing the Duchess. Bosola demands payment, but Ferdinand says he will get only a pardon for his murders.

Bosola protests the injustice. Still quick to anger rather than regret, Ferdinand turns on Bosola, blaming him for the Duchess' death. Filled with self-loathing and guilt he banishes Bosola, still refusing to pay him.

The Duchess rouses for a moment, and Bosola tell her Antonio is still alive – lying that he will be reconciled with her brothers. Comforted, she dies. Unemployed, moneyless, banished and dejected, Bosola decides to go to Milan.

Act V

The title character dead, the play's last act is a whirlwind of action, of final consequences, and loose ends being tied up. Antonio asks Delio to help him get some of his estates back. With Antonio hidden, Delio asks a lord named Pescara to give him Antonio's estates for safekeeping. They are interrupted by Julia, who has a letter from the Cardinal, granting her the estates. Pescara gives them to her. He explains to Delio later, that the land he asked for was forcibly taken from his friend Antonio, and that he is reluctant to give such tainted land to a friend. He adds that he is going to see Ferdinand, still mentally ill.

In the next scene, a doctor tells Pescara that Ferdinand has lycanthropy – he thinks he's a wolf, and digs up graves, carrying off the corpses. Ferdinand enters with Malateste, the Cardinal and Bosola, complaining that his shadow haunts him. In another fit of rage, he throws himself upon his shadow to try and strangle it. When the doctor asks what might have prompted Ferdinand's madness, his brother feigns ignorance. Bosola and the Cardinal fence verbally, each pretending they know nothing of the Duchess' death, but probing the other's feelings. The Cardinal sends Bosola to find Antonio, claiming that with him dead, the Duchess is free to remarry someone of his choice.

Julia bursts in upon Bosola with a gun, saying she has fallen in love with him. Bosola asks her to spy on the Cardinal for him. She meets the Cardinal (who has tired of her) and gets the story of the Duchess' murder out of him. He makes her swear not to tell anyone, by kissing his poisoned bible. Bosola enters too late – she forgives the Cardinal and dies. Apparently not suspicious of Bosola yet,

the Cardinal once more bribes him to act for him, this time to kill Antonio.

The scene shifts to Antonio and Delio standing outside the Cardinal's citadel. As they talk, an echo arises from the Duchess' grave, repeating the most ominous phrases (“deadly”, “sorrow”, “Never see her more”) as if to alert the audience to further bloodshed. (V. iii)

The next scene occurs in the dark, outside the Cardinal's house. The Cardinal prepares to move Julia's body, and command his household to stay put, however much of a commotion Ferdinand makes. He decides that when Bosola has served his turn, he will kill him too.

Bosola overhears the cardinal's plans for him. Ferdinand enters, still raving, and exits. Shortly after, Antonio enters with a servant. He asks the servant to go fetch a lantern. In the dark, Bosola, still full of suspicions, stabs. Antonio cries out. The servant returns with a lamp, and Bosola realises that he has killed the person he intended to save. His reaction is despairing, fatalistic: “We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and banded / Which way please them.”(V. iv. 53) He tells the dying Antonio that the Duchess and the two younger children are also dead.

Bosola decides to take matters into his own hands.

The last scene moves inside the Cardinal's house. The Cardinal sits with a book, and for the first time seems to feel a twinge of conscience, and an apprehension that all is not well: “When I look into the fishponds in my garden,/ Methinks I see a thing arm'd with a rake/ That seems to strike me.” (V. v. 5-7) Bosola and a servant enter, carrying Antonio's body, ready to murder the Cardinal. He calls for help, but since he has instructed his household to stay away, only four of the courtiers, including Pescara and Malateste hear, and resolve to leave. Bosola stabs the Cardinal who panics, screaming for help and offering his dukedom to anyone who'll save him. Ferdinand bursts in with a sword, apparently unable to recognise his own brother – he stabs both Bosola and the Cardinal. Dying, Bosola manages to kill Ferdinand as well.

The Cardinal gets in one last jibe at Bosola before he dies, verbal in his case, pointing out that in receiving his death too, Bosola has been paid appropriately for the murders he committed. The nobles who heard them earlier finally enter, and hear the story of what happened from Bosola.

The play ends with Delio and Antonio's son entering upon the corpse-filled stage, and viewing the tragedy.

Section 5: Characters

The Duchess

The historical character the Duchess is based on was named Giovanna d'Aragona – but in the play she is only ever referred to – even by herself – by her public persona, her political position as the Duchess of Malfi. In the scene in her bedroom, early in the play, we see the Duchess bantering and laughing with Antonio and Cariola – the family she has made for herself. As soon as she finds herself with Ferdinand, who is holding a poinard, the tonal shift from intimate self-doubt to public dignity is immediate. The Duchess takes the poinard from him, saying: “’Tis welcome/ For know: whether I am doom'd to live or die,/ I can do both like a prince.” (III. ii. 69-71)

The Duchess comes across as a woman who knows her own mind, and follows heedless of consequences. She stands her ground with her brothers at every step, treating the Cardinal's chilly manipulation and Ferdinand's hot rages with equal composure. In a sense she is better at her job, being a noble, than either of her brothers: she has the calm self-conviction missing in Ferdinand, and the wit and generosity the Cardinal so conspicuously lacks.

In her interactions with Antonio, it is always the Duchess who takes the lead, makes decisions, arranges matters. It is she who proposes to marry Antonio, overcomes his worries, and arranges for Cariola to witness. It is she who insists on secrecy. When her brothers find out, in a reversal of conventional gender roles, she sends Antonio away to safety while she faces them.

Bosola

Bosola is introduced to the audience as an unpleasant person, deprived, envious: a man who “rails at those things which he wants” (I. i. 25). Bosola's attitude towards the nobility is compounded of envy for their fortune, dislike for their subsequent power over him, and a hunger for their position, for the financial stability and prestige it will bring.

Like Antonio, he is a commoner; unlike Antonio, he has served masters who are corrupt and ungrateful. When the play opens, he has already served years as a galley slave for murdering someone at the Cardinal's behest. His dislike for the Cardinal is palpable – but as someone with neither money nor connections in the court, he needs a patron. Ferdinand and the Cardinal are the only people he knows for the purpose, so he falls in with their plans to spy on the Duchess.

Bosola's growing horror with the events unfolding goes with his growing admiration for the Duchess. When she is imprisoned, he asks Ferdinand to stop tormenting her. Bosola's guilt over spying on and deceiving the Duchess is made literal when he refuses to let her see him – first he covers his face with a visor, later he disguises himself.

When Bosola accidentally kills Antonio, whom he wanted to protect, he seems to come to some kind of fatalistic peace, akin to the Duchess'. He finally throws off all his longings for power and his desire for honour and recognition: "I will not imitate things glorious,/ No more than base: I'll be mine own example." (V. iv. 81-82) His actions when dying reflects his new attitude – he blames the circumstances, but is no longer railing and embittered by them, as he was at the beginning of the play, letting the nobles know the whole story and his role in it.

Cariola

Catherine Belsey remarks that on the seventeenth century, close servants could be family. If Bosola and Cariola parallel each other, so too – in a more unobtrusive way, does Cariola. She is paid for it, yes, but she is also the Duchess' closest friend. She is forthright in her opinions – more so than Antonio, who obeys the Duchess with far less arguing. She witnesses her secret wedding, and stands by through her fleeing. When all her family has been taken from her, it is Cariola who remains with the Duchess, intending perhaps to stay till her death – until Bosola has her removed.

She is the only (sane) person in the play who faces death less philosophically, and more practically. She fights when faced with death. She fights, she struggles, she argues, she protests, to save the Duchess, and later to save herself. She neither cries for help like the Cardinal; nor does she seem resigned and calm like the duchess.

Antonio

Antonio is the first person we meet in the play. He is a commoner, and his reflections upon the effect the court has on the people, and on the importance of a ruler who recognises and accepts good counsel are the reflections of one who stands outside, and in the role of an adviser. It is through him that we realise that Bosola's thirst for social acceptance makes him corruptible, and that the Cardinal is dangerous.

Antonio seems content to take on a passive role in his relationship with the Duchess. He follows where she leads, keeping the marriage which would greatly enhance his social status completely secret, and even play-acting his own corruption and dismissal from her household. His behaviour is completely selfless, and always pacific.

To the very end he is willing to make peace with the Duchess' brothers, apparently forgiving them the behaviour that led to his dismissal from Malfi, the ejection of his family and then separation of his family. His manner of dealing with death is as stoic as his wife's – when he hears that she and his children are dead, he accepts his own end almost gladly. Antonio's final speech is philosophical, poetic: “In all our quest of greatness/ Like wanton boys, whose pastime is their care/ We follow the bubbles blown in the air.” (V. v. 63-65)

As he lived, he dies with concern for someone else – Delio and his eldest son.

Ferdinand

Even though, by the play's time, at least three years have passed since the Duchess' secret marriage – she has borne three children – Ferdinand's frenzied wrath seems not to have abated at all. He seems to consider his twin an extension of himself, and his mental turmoil is that of someone whose own self has betrayed them. Modern readings of the play tend to see his obsession with his sister as partly incestuous.

Incestuous or not, Ferdinand's obsessive tormenting of his sister is accompanied by an equally obsessive refusal to see her. Sight is important to Ferdinand – he needs the Duchess to see her ring on a dead man's hand, just as he wants her to see the corpses of her family. After refusing to see her face for so long, when he sees her dead body, he is both drawn to it and overcome by it: “Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young.” (IV. ii. 267-268) This sight provides the impetus for Ferdinand to turn on Bosola. It is now too, that he develops the symptoms that his doctor calls lycanthropy – he thinks he's a wolf, and he digs up corpses. He barely knows his own brother, stabbing him and Bosola in a frenzy.

Ferdinand's obsessive madness makes him a less villainous figure than his brother – he lacks the self-command to stop himself committing his crimes; and the self-awareness to know the implications of what he does.

The Cardinal

The eldest of the three siblings, the Cardinal is more closed and reserved than his siblings. Like the Duchess, he preserves a calm exterior even when he is truly angry or agitated. Unlike her, however, when he finds himself faced with death in the person of Bosola, he is panic-stricken. He cries for help, bribing anyone who is listening with his dukedom. For someone who was, and now is again, a soldier, it is striking behaviour.

Of the three siblings, it is the Cardinal who is – ironically, given he is a priest – the most worldly. He is concerned with money, with temporal power, with political manoeuvrings. His anger with his sister is purely political – he wants her in a marriage which will bring him additional power, money or connections. His reaction is to want Antonio killed.

His solution to the problem is also political: he uses his clout to get his sister and her family evicted from Ancona (traditionally churches were places of refuge), and his position in the church to remove her wedding ring and nullify her marriage. There is nothing spiritual or godly in his attitude to the Church. This reaches its logical conclusion when he uses his bible to poison his mistress.

Towards the end, he remarks, “I would pray now: but the devil takes away my heart/ For having any confidence in prayer.” (V. iv. 26-27) His religion is completely gone now – physically, when he put on his armour, and now wholly, when even prayer is impossible for him; indeed it is debatable whether he ever had any religion, since we learn earlier that he was a soldier before he joined the Church. His greed for estates, his breaking of the vows of celibacy in his affair with Julia (of course, the fact that he was a Catholic priest would've made him even less sympathetic to many of Webster's audience), and his abuse of his power in all his dealings with his sister and Bosola, make the Cardinal a completely corrupt figure.

Section 6: Themes

The themes of the Duchess of Malfi intersect and criss-cross with each other, creating a complex moral world. If the Duchess' brothers see pity as incommensurate with being powerful; the Duchess seems to posit it as an obligation to be followed by one who is powerful. Bosola who scorns to pity anyone at the beginning of the play, finds that he has come round to the Duchess' point of view. Decay and corruption are also bound up with the other themes – power corrupts, but madness too is a kind of corruption of the mind.

Power, Corruption and Nobility

“The spring in his face is/ nothing but the engend'ring of toads,” says Antonio of the Cardinal in the very first act (I. i. 85-86) He judges that the Cardinal's corruption is so deeply entrenched that it decays and ruins all he does, everyone he comes in contact with.

Power allows Ferdinand and the Cardinal to judge and kill their sister and her entire family with no repercussions from the outside world. A thirst for power is also what drives Bosola to take employment with them, even though he hates them. For Bosola, power is merely the ability to be in charge of his own self, and his own future. For Ferdinand and the Cardinal, power implies absolute control over all they encounter – their sister, her estates, churchmen in Ancona, Julia, various nobles and servants they meet. Ethical considerations never trouble either of them – their power has corrupted them absolutely. They appear to conflate their power and their position as nobility as justifying each other.

Bosola, on the contrary, hesitates at every juncture – he speaks up for Antonio's honesty, he defends the Duchess to Ferdinand, and eventually, he decides to forget his quest for power and do what he considers the right thing.

The Duchess' nobility is of a very different kind from her brothers. If Ferdinand's sole criteria for nobility is blood; the Cardinal's seems to be power. Instead, her treatment of Cariola and Antonio is in sharp contrast to her brothers' conversations with all those they consider their dependants and social inferiors – she is friendly, confiding, warm. And she is repaid by their affection and loyalty.

It is to be noted that all the characters are introduced to us via Antonio, who is a commoner. His ideas and opinions colour the audience's reading of the characters – and his enthusiastic praise of the Duchess as 'sweet', 'divine' and 'virtuous' makes the reader predisposed to like her.

Family

Catherine Belsey notes that there are two constructions of family in *The Duchess of Malfi*, at war with each other. The Duchess sees family as a private realm, one which she is free to create for herself, populating it with those she loves and trusts. Her marriage to Antonio is constructed as an act of private, romantic love – they don't even have it conducted by the Church. They keep it secret,

wholly between themselves and their closest friends.

The Duchess takes her role as a mother seriously – her last words to Cariola are to ask her to mind her children. Though she has been told they're dead, they are still on her mind.

Ferdinand and the Cardinal, as we have seen, see the Duchess' marriage as a social and political act which concerns her entire family. The Cardinal's rage is centred on the fact that he has no influence on her choice; Ferdinand's seems to see it even more personally, as a betrayal of a body he regarded as almost his own – they are twins, after all. He can't rest until he has destroyed her.

When Ferdinand sees the Duchess' corpse, he is suddenly overwhelmed. In bitter irony, he takes recourse to the justice system he and his brother have ignored and overruled right through the play: “Was I her judge?” he asks, going on to demand what law, what jury sentenced her to death. (300) Ferdinand's construction of the family, we see again, is deeply flawed. While the blood they share flowed in her, he viewed the Duchess as his property to marry off, imprison, torture as he wished; now she is dead, and the domestic life (her children after all were partly Ferdinand's blood) she staked so much on destroyed, he sees her as a citizen who is subject to the public laws.

It's too late of course, for both of them. Ferdinand loses his mind completely. It is only at the end, when he is dying, that Ferdinand seems to remember himself a little, still blaming the Duchess for everything:

My sister, O! my sister, there's the cause on't.

Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust,

Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust. (V. v. 70-72)

Madness

The theme of madness runs through the play – it is first suggested when Cariola terms the Duchess' marriage to Antonio madness. Given her brothers' reactions, her insistence on keeping it secret, and on not enlisting guards and nobles to her side is problematic. However the Duchess' mistake is not in her madness – which is just impulsiveness – but in her underestimation of the violence of her brothers' reactions. The news of the Duchess' having borne a child starts Ferdinand's slow descent into incoherence. His brother attempts to stem him, but Ferdinand is determined: “I'll find scorpions to string my whips, / and fix her in a general eclipse.” (II. v. 79-80)

This determination soon becomes the only thing that holds any meaning for him. When the Duchess is imprisoned, her sane, reasonable behaviour only enrages him further. It is as if expects his twin to share his mental state. It is with this is mind that he arranges for the masque of madmen. Many of

these are mad because they were disappointed in what they thought was reasonable: the astrologer predicts a day of doom, and when it didn't occur he went mad; the tailor is driven insane by new fashions; a farmer by problems transporting his grain. Their ravings are often to do with the erstwhile jobs that lent them identity – the astrologer talks of doomsday, for example, and the doctor about his apothecary. Like Ferdinand's assumption that his twin will be exactly like him, these are all people who think themselves experts at something, only to find that their knowledge and expertise means nothing in the world after all.

Ferdinand's claiming to Bosola that he killed the Duchess because he wanted her lands – which all his prior raving renders patently untrue – seems to be his final attempt to prove to himself that his actions are governed by reason. After that his mind is entirely overthrown. Ferdinand's lycanthropy is not this kind of madness – it seems to be of a completely different order, destroying his identity and his sense of self (something the madmen still retain, even if flawed). Ferdinand comes to think that he is a different species entirely, putting himself completely beyond reason.

Vengeance vs Pity

The Duchess of Malfi isn't a revenge play in the traditional sense in that no one is actually wronged until much later in the play. Even then, those who consider themselves wronged – Ferdinand and the Cardinal – and set out to take vengeance, are themselves committing the crime. The objects of their vengeance are completely innocent. In the very end, Bosola is the person who calls for revenge, spurred on by his role in the death of the Duchess and her children. The fact that he himself has killed them – even if under orders – is not something he sees as standing between him becoming Antonio's ally.

In this blood-soaked atmosphere pity is alien, a weakness. When Bosola begs Ferdinand to release his sister, the former sneers, “Thy pity is nothing of kin to thee.” (IV. i. 135) His use of the word 'kin' with 'pity' reminds us that the object of Bosola's pity is Ferdinand's kin – his closest kin, in fact. Ferdinand, if anyone, should be feeling pity for her. In the next scene, when Bosola shows Ferdinand the strangled children, he lobs the word back at him saying, “But here begin your pity.” (IV. v. 260) Ferdinand's reply is cold, foreshadowing his descent into animality: “The death/ of young wolves is never to be pitied.” (261-262)

Bosola goes looking for Antonio in the hope of helping avenge the Duchess; Antonio in the very next scene is contemplating taking his son to visit the Cardinal, he and Delio fondly imagining that

the child's innocence will inspire the latter with compassion. He is killed by his would-be-ally on the way in. In the end, Webster's message is bleak: chaotic vengeance carries the day, commemorated by Bosola's long litany of the dead and their respective killers.

Do You Know?

1. Amalfi is a city in Italy. In the 10th and 11th centuries the Duchy of Amalfi was a powerful state and trading centre. The Duchess of the play is based on the real Giovanna d'Aragona, who was married to Duke Alfonso Piccolomini.
2. In Webster's time, women characters' parts were usually played by boys.
3. If you watch a movie called Shakespeare in Love, there's a brief appearance by a morbid little boy called John Webster.
4. King James was somewhat paranoid about witchcraft. During his reign in Scotland, many women were tortured and burnt as witches. He also wrote a book on witches called *Daemonologie*.
5. With the colonisation of America, the Jacobean era was also a time when smoking tobacco became suddenly and enormously popular.
6. In 1642, the English Civil war began. The Puritan government of Oliver Cromwell considered drama immoral. Under them, all the theatres of London were shut down. They wouldn't re-open until 1660.

Points to Ponder

1. How do you feel about Julia's behaviour and her eventual fate? What clues do they give us to her society's attitudes to women?
2. Can we compare Ferdinand and the Cardinal's attitudes and behaviour to the Duchess to the idea of 'honour killings' in India?
3. Cariola's loyalty to the duchess is absolute – she is a servant, but she is also friend and is considered almost like family. In her place, would you feel the same way?
4. Do you think Antonio would have made a good Duke?
5. How do you feel about the different characters in the play? Do you agree with the Puritans that they are immoral? And do you think this is a reason to ban a play?

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