

# Dilemma of a Widow as a Ruler in *The Duchess of Malfi*

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## **Abstract**

*The Duchess of Malfi* is a revenge tragedy, but Webster has used the form for much more than just its entertaining value. He has utilized it as a vehicle for the exploration of some themes relevant to the society of his time. Women and questions concerning feminine nature are used to signify troubling social and political issues of the day. The play deals, in different ways, with issues of political instability and constructs a rhetoric of femininity and feminine nature which complements the political aspects of the drama. It moves around a female protagonist, and her predicament shows how the themes of the play are constructed by Webster's thinking about social issues of his day. Ironically, he was making points about women's rights at a time when only men were allowed to act on the stage. This article tries to analyse the relationship between Jacobean society and a widow, the norms surrounding marriage, the freedom of women, and the state of patriarchy in England.

*The Duchess of Malfi* is generally considered Webster's greatest achievement. Hammond says that in the *Duchess*, "we are given one of the greatest of tragic heroines, [someone] who tries to establish a good, Christian life in the context of the deranged hostility of her brother Ferdinand and the less unstable, but equally cruel, machinations of the Cardinal" (294). Webster based his plot on a true story<sup>1</sup> set in Italy. He kept the Italian setting, like Shakespeare and other playwrights of his time would often do, as a politically-acceptable foreign locale where he would be able to explore ideas of inequality, injustice, and

corruption, without causing outrage. Like many playwrights of the time Webster had a legal background, and this served to make him more aware of the inequalities of the law involving a widow. He had a sensitive awareness of these inequalities and the play illustrates the ridiculous views taken by the community about the issue.

Webster's Duchess is not frail. The Duchess says, "We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us" (I.i. 442). In this line we can see that Webster has emphasised the Duchess's commanding character. Of course, Shakespeare has created stronger women than Ophelia, but when we think of his portrayal of tragic women, we think either of Ophelia, who asks her father what she should think, or of Lady Macbeth, who initiates evil deeds but is too weak to finish what she started. Webster's Duchess, on the other hand, is a strong woman with a dignity that Shakespeare's tragic women just do not seem to have. She is true to her husband and retains her dignity, even at the moment of her death. Like the classical Medea and Shakespeare's Desdemona, the Duchess leaves her family, but unlike these celebrated heroines, the Duchess takes dignified and noble decisions in her attempt to save both her husband and children.

Among the most memorable lines of the play is this one: "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.ii.142). The Duchess's reaffirmation of her position can be perceived as a sign of her strength and resolve. Robert Ornstein says, "Her [Duchess's] self possession in the face of death is a spiritual victory rather than a glorious defeat" (1975:140). Ornstein almost compares the Duchess with Shakespeare's Cleopatra, inferring that, in death, she will be able to transcend her worldly life. Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that we do not learn her true name at any point of the play. The Duchess is denied an identity even when she is seemingly a symbol of absolute virtue. Her moral victory then, is somewhat vitiated.

Whereas it was quite common for a male figure of power to marry below his status, it was quite unacceptable for a noble female to conduct herself in that way. Thus, even when married to her, Antonio can never be her equal in power. Powerful women, being considered by some to be unnatural and dangerous, provoked much controversy at that time, a pertinent example being Queen Elizabeth Tudor. The Duchess's desperate insistence on marrying Antonio, her second husband, is an action which shows that she has her own desires, and a more dominant will than anybody around her. Webster has given her all the qualities that Antonio, her spouse, lacks, qualities which were not thought to be desirable in a widow of that era; she plots, schemes and has a bold and impetuous nature.

Bosola and Duke Ferdinand represent the kind of unbridled Machiavellian ambition with which the English were fascinated. Although the Duchess, Ferdinand, and the Cardinal were Spanish rulers occupying parts of a divided Italy, the setting allows Webster to exploit Renaissance Italy's murderous corruption. The works of the ancient Roman writer Seneca, dark and bloody adaptations of Greek tragedy, were also a major influence on Webster and his contemporaries. Yet, *The Duchess of Malfi* is a play about breaking conventions. The Duchess woos and marries her household steward, an inversion of tight Jacobean male/female roles and class restrictions. She proclaims her unconventional behavior thus: "I am going into a wilderness, / Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew / To be my guide" (I.i. 359-361). Ferdinand speaks offensively toward his sister, even calling her a "lusty widow" (I.i. 340). Leech points out that "incest is merely implied in *The Duchess of Malfi* because the queer nature of the play does not allow it to become an absolute. Evidence supports the idea that Webster would like his audience to view Ferdinand's rage against his sister's remarriage stemming from a feeling of incest that even he himself may not recognize" (57)

The Renaissance was a time of individualism, and saw men and women moving away from the communal structure of medieval society. The Duchess's assertion of herself shows both the heroism and limitations of her character, notable especially for a widow whose position in patriarchal society is tenuous. Her public role as a political figure is violated by her desire for a life of her own, reminding the audience of Queen Elizabeth's decision to remain unmarried, in deference to her country. The lady-in-waiting Cariola's assessment of the Duchess's marriage indicates the Jacobean response to her actions:

CARIOLA:           Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman  
                              Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows  
                              A fearful madness; I owe her much of pity. ( I.i. 488-490)

Women rulers and the circumstances they had to deal with are very much unlike what men rulers had to encounter. Women had to worry about society's propensities, their own feelings, and the welfare of their people. It was much more difficult to be a widow in power than to be a man in power. The choices women rulers made could not be only for them, and one wrong decision could bring disaster. It is in such a context that we should judge the Duchess's actions and her resolve when she says,

DUCHESS:      Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred  
                          Lay in my way unto this marriage,  
                          I'd make them my low footsteps: and even now,  
                          Even in this hate, as men in some great battles,  
                          By apprehending danger, have achiev'd  
                          Almost impossible actions? I have heard soldiers say so.  
                          So I, through frights, and threat'nings, will assay  
                          This dangerous venture: let old wives report  
                          I wink'd and chose a husband. (I.i. 341-349)

John Webster's Duchess is certainly a very complex figure. Although it could be alleged that she brought her misfortunes upon herself by presuming to choose her own husband, as Cariola says at the end of the first act, the play's sympathies are for her. *The Duchess of Malfi* was judged by some readers as a cautionary tale, by others as an inspirational one, and by most she was seen as a woman to be pitied, for as Steen says, "all may be attributed to the great love she had for the person she had chosen to be her husband." (76).

Queen Elizabeth I ruled over England alone. She never married; instead she chose to claim that she was married to her country. By taking this position, Elizabeth retained her authority and became famous. In the process, she endeared herself to her people and chose the path to immortality. In contrast, the Duchess, choosing love, chooses her downfall.

The position of women was contradictory and constantly shifting in the early Jacobean period. Single women were seen as having a handicap that could only be remedied through the process of marriage. There was only one honorable and acceptable position for single women in the Catholic faith: the nun. Then she had some power over herself. In the Protestant faith, the only honorable position for a woman was marriage and, to a lesser degree, widowhood. These views made a woman's position ambivalent. A single woman was subject to the rule of her father. Names such as "old maid" and "spinster" were used to denigrate her status and encourage her to marry. Her chastity was often questioned. Jankowski says, "as a single, unmarried woman, she could not own or sell property, draw up her will or initiate law suits" (24). Every possible device was used by society to pressure a single woman into marriage.

Widows were viewed as anomalies by the patriarchal societies of the 16th and 17th centuries. Jankowski says: "A widow was considered an ungoverned woman who challenged and threatened societal norms of the period" (35). A

widow had legal rights that single and married women did not have. As, Jankowski attests, "A widow never directly inherited land, though she could hold it for a minor son. She had the legal right to control her properties in her own or her children's interests" (35). She could draw up her own will. A widow was free to choose her next husband, while a never-married woman usually had her prospective husband chosen for her. The knowledge that with remarriage come the losses of these legal rights caused many women to decide against remarriage. Since the widow was often seen as "ungoverned" and "threatening" to current social norms, social pressure was put on the widow to remarry or be considered sexually promiscuous and even risk being called a whore. Never-married and widowed women were discriminated against and made to feel inferior to married women.

For many people during the Jacobean period, powerful women were considered unnatural and dangerous. Jankowski says: "The image of female dominance is an image of social disorder" (55). In the patriarchal society of the time everyone looked towards a male figure as the center of supreme power. Powerful women were therefore often denigrated and seen as dysfunctional. Despite having experienced three reigning women monarchs during this period—Mary Stuart, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth Tudor—most people felt uneasy at the thought of having women rulers. Desmet says: "reading the play from the perspective of the controversy over women underscores the fact that a patriarchal culture seeks to define the female ruler out of existence" (86).

Todd, in an essay on the treatment of the widow stereotype in Renaissance comedies, sums up the view of widows in that society quite well:

A married woman was legally and personally subject to her husband. A widow was free from such control. Even if she was poor, she was her own woman and could run her life as she saw fit... But the independent woman was also an anomaly. English patriarchal society required that, like the state, the household should be headed by a man. The woman heading her own household contradicted the patriarchal theory; the ungoverned woman was a threat to social order. (55)

But in *The Duchess of Malfi*, unlike in Renaissance comedies, people do not want the Duchess to remarry; her brothers seem allied against the social order, suggesting that the Duchess should avoid remarriage, and that it "is the entrance into some prison," (I.i. 325) a statement that becomes a reality in Act-IV. Scene-i. The Duchess is neither an ordinary nor virtuous widow; she is

something altogether different, and we can agree with Robert Ornstein when he says: "In temperament she is a heroine of Shakespearean romantic comedy, graceful, witty, wanton and innocent at the same time, who woos and wins her husband in spite of himself. She capriciously ignores the challenge of an aristocratic life, but the challenge of death - the supreme challenge in Jacobean tragedy - she accepts boldly and triumphantly." (1968:71)

In *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, Arthur Kinney has pointed out the social significance of a widow in Renaissance England, where "virtuous" widows, who remained chaste and kept mourning, might be contrasted with "ordinary" widows, whose previous marriages had awakened sexual desire and whose morals were subsequently highly suspect. Webster himself had spoken against such views in other published works. As the number of widows rose in disease-ridden London, it created social concern regarding loose or uncontrolled women.

DUCHESS:       Why might not I marry?  
                       I have not gone about, in this, to create  
                       Any new world, or custom. (III. ii, 110-112)

However, Webster chose to portray a duchess, and not some London bawd, one whose story was based loosely on the facts of a sensational murder case in Italy. As a noblewoman, although a nameless one, the Duchess of Malfi occupies a position of power. She would be responsible for overseeing her tenants, determining land use, settling disputes, and managing her personal household. She would maintain her own household autonomously, but could not be trusted to arrange her own marriage. As Webster's heroines put the situation

DUCHESS:       The birds, that live i' th' field  
                       On the wild benefit of nature, live  
                       Happier than we; for they may choose their mates.  
                       (III. iv. 18-20)

The Duchess poses a threat to the gender hierarchy. She is a noble ruler in her public life. Callaghan says, "From the moment of her assertion of sexual independence, the Duchess moves with dignity and inexorably towards a ritual chastisement worthy of a flagrant breach of public order" (68). In her private life she is virtuous and true to her self. She marries for love rather than for class distinction. The important fact of the play is that the Duchess goes against the social order of her times and the patriarchal rule of her brothers. For this she is punished. Ferdinand expresses his murderous thoughts to the Cardinal thus:

FERDINAND: So; I will only study to seem  
The thing I am not. I could kill her now,  
In you, or in myself, for I do think  
It is some sin in us, heaven doth revenge  
By her. (II. v. 62-66)

Part of the emotional power behind the play lies in the Duchess's ability to articulate her situation with eloquence and reason in the face of inhuman tortures and madness. When Bosola insists that she must remain alive the Duchess tells him: "That's the greatest torture souls feel in hell - / In hell: that they must live, and cannot die." (IV.i. 70-71). The Duchess is the center of an insane world, a world gone horribly wrong. Relationships of kinship are betrayed when Ferdinand first imprisons and then murders his own twin. Her brothers betray her—the Cardinal for her money and Ferdinand in a psychopathic display of power and control.

The theme of female emotion and female autonomy as a powerful destabilizing agent comes through the play quite clearly, although Webster does not universally condemn the individual woman in it. In the play, the leading female character chooses her lover, but in doing so, brings about tragedy.

As a study of an emancipated widow, *The Duchess of Malfi* reflects the great social and political transitions evident in Jacobean England. Jardine points out that the Duchess is a "completely isolated character, utterly alone in the world, associated with no female companions of her own rank" (204). The Duchess of Malfi doubtlessly felt the pressures, both positive and negative, associated with widowhood, and there is evidence that she experienced some difficulty in reconciling the two. She is clearly aware of her rights as a widow, yet she still allows herself to be constrained by the traditional patriarchal elements of her society. On the one hand she asserts her freedom by marrying Antonio against the wishes of her brothers; yet on the other, she allows Ferdinand and the Cardinal to attack her virtue, and then adds the self-defeating comments in which she likens herself to a diamond whose value increases each time it is passed through another man's hand. By sexualizing herself and allowing the innuendoes about the lustiness of widows, she allows herself to be degraded. This sort of incongruous behavior continues throughout the play as the Duchess time and again seemingly reconfirms her brothers's assumptions about her.

The Duchess's premature death is a glaring example of the way Webster deviates from the conventional structure of a typical tragedy. The tragic protagonist dies a full act before the play is completed, and without the death of the Duchess's tormentors, the catharsis drags itself out into Act V, resulting in the blood bath that follows. Lueke says, "it may be then possible to judge the play, finally, only by removing our lens from the individual character and scene by focusing on the whole." (288)

Though John Webster explored the dilemma of a widow nearly 400 years ago, the struggles are not entirely alien to our society. Today women must reconcile the pressures of family and work, much as the Duchess had to maintain her relationships with her brothers, her husband, and her subjects in Amalfi. Furthermore, Antonio's struggle for self-definition is a universal one. Upon his marriage to the Duchess, he found himself in a social setting for which he was totally unprepared. This is not different from the way many of us feel today. The Duchess's marriage was not seen as admirable in Jacobean England. The audience would have seen the Duchess's marriage as an indulgence; she had put her own needs above the needs of the state and above decorum. Her status as a member of the nobility, they believed, had placed certain responsibilities upon her. To jeopardize her reputation in a marriage not condoned by society meant jeopardizing her ability to rule. But Webster presents his duchess as a widow who could easily be mistaken as a modern feminist. Her disregard for unfair social and political traditions, which perpetrated oppression and were controlled by men, for the sake of love makes her a heroine from the perspective of modern values. However, we must note that though she may appear completely innocent to us the Duchess did not live today; she came from a period that our modern culture has little notion of, or if it does, sees that period as unjust and repressive.

### **Note:**

1. The story of the *Duchess of Malfi* was told by Matteo Bandello as his twenty-sixth novella: this is a clear, circumstantial account, by an author who may have been the Delio who tried to help Antonio shortly before his assassination in Milan in October 1513. The Italian account was then translated and augmented to four times its length by Belleforest in his second volume of *Histoires Tragiques* (1565). Now the tale was embellished with long speeches and made an occasion for recommending traditional moral attitudes, and in this form William Painter rendered it in English, with only minor alterations of emphasis, for the second



volume of his *Palace of Pleasure* (1567). It was this version what Webster used. Webster accepted the main outline of Painter's story, but modified, reshaped, and elaborated it to sustain a wider interest and lead to a wider conclusion. The most obvious change is the recasting of several agents of the Duchess' brothers as one person, Bosola. This at once simplified the narrative and complicated the characterization.

See Brown, John Russell, ed. Introduction, *The Duchess of Malfi*, The Revels Plays, Manchester University Press, 1986, p-xxvii

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