
Flying of Destiny: a Look at the Echoes in the Duchess of Malfi

The main themes of “The Duchess of Malfi” are expertly demonstrated by Webster throughout many of the play’s intriguing scenes and dialogues. One particular instance occurs in the famous echo scene (5.3.1-55) between Antonio and Delio. As they are discussing the nature of fate in the lives of men, their words are met with a ghostly echo, presumably the voice of the Duchess’ from beyond the grave. The echo, a definitively gothic element, is important in exploring the limitations of death and the power of fate as themes in this classic tragic tale.

The idea of female power and its limitations is uniquely crafted by Webster in the character of The Duchess. In life, she is depicted as a definite figure of female heroism and a bold and fearless woman of power. Due to the many stigmas surrounding her behavior as a female, the Duchess is consequently met with scorn and is faced with limitations upon her power to make decisions. These hindrances, however, often do not deter her from giving up her independence or bold spirit. The famous line “I am Duchess of Malfi still” (4.2.134) relays the power, duty, and above all, heroism the Duchess possesses even at the brink of death.

The echo scene marks a complete shift in the Duchess’s possession of power. Here, the Duchess is still able to communicate and suggest ideas to her husband, but she is unable to physically ensure that they are accomplished. Death represents the definitive limitation against the Duchess. In life, most of her power was relayed not only through her voice and words, but by her body as well. Naturally, her physical beauty had played a role in her successes in dealing with others. Antonio earlier states that, “Whilst she speaks, She throws upon a man so sweet a look, that it were able to raise one to a galliard” (1.1.189-191) -- meaning that she could sway a man with just one look. It is clear that her possession of physical beauty played a large part in how well she was able to influence others, and it seems to have been a key advantage in her sense of female power. In the echo scene, death has left her at a loss for her most powerful asset in persuasion—her body.

In this scene, the spirit of the Duchess expresses itself through the mysterious echoing that follows Antonio and Delio’s words: “A thing of sorrow” (5.3.23), “Do not” (5.3.29), and “Be mindful of thy safety” (5.3.32) are all cautions the Duchess desperately attempts to relay to Antonio. Importantly, the spirit of the Duchess does not repeat each line that is spoken -- as a true echo would -- but rather only highlights those words dealing with death, sorrow and fate. Due to the Duchess’s lack of physical presence, her warnings are ultimately unsuccessful in gaining the serious attention of these two men. Antonio instead seems to spurn the ghostly

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advice of his wife by dismissing it as nothing more than a natural occurrence.

These echoes also serve to craftily explore the ambiguity regarding the nature of fate and how much influence our decisions have over our own lives. While standing in the ruins of an ancient abbey, Antonio regards that “all things have their end: Churches and cities, which have disease like to men, Must have like death that we have.” (5.3.17-19). He is reflecting on the idea that men have no true influence over their own fates nor the fate of what is around them. As the phrase goes, often the best laid plans of men go awry. After Antonio makes this statement, the echo presents its first interjection, repeating his line about death. Delio comments that the echo has “caught” Antonio, an interesting insinuation that he is helpless not only to his fate but to these ominous warnings as well. This introduces the notion that there is a higher power among the characters in the ruins, one that could possibly be in control of Antonio’s own future.

Ignoring the advice of his companion and that of the ghostly echoes, Antonio asserts his belief that one cannot outrun one’s own fate. As Delio reminds Antonio to “be mindful of thy safety” (5.3.31), Antonio replies that he is ambivalent towards caution. He is compelled to be careful; however, he also realizes that treading along the path of life softly does not ensure that you can do so safely. “You’ll find it impossible/To fly your fate” (5.3.33-34), he proclaims. Here, the Duchess interjects with an alarming echo that disagrees with Antonio’s opinion: “O fly your fate” (5.3.35), the echo calls in an almost pleading manner. It is clear the Duchess is also very concerned for the safety of Antonio, and believes he must attempt to escape his fate.

To her credit, the Duchess does manage to get Delio on her side. He tells Antonio that the echo seems to be giving good advice, and that perhaps Antonio should dodge his fate. However, Antonio dismisses the echo as a mere “dead thing” (5.3.39) and holds fast in his idea to face whatever the future holds for him. Antonio clearly believes that men have no true power over the events that occur in their lives, and often their attempts to change it prove for the worst: “Though in our miseries Fortune have a part, Yet in our noble suff’rings she hath none. Contempt of pain—that we may call our own.” (5.3.54-56). Antonio decides to face his future head-on by remaining at the castle, rather than flee the country and risk living in a “mockery and abuse of life” (5.3.47).

The echo scene of Act V clearly raises the question of how much influence one man can have over his own life. It also raises the question as to whether or not these characters can truly outrun their fates. Webster presents both sides of the argument: Delio and the Duchess’ echoes are clearly in agreement as they both believe Antonio can escape his foreboding death by running away, while Antonio maintains that fate will play out the way it wishes, irregardless of any man’s attempts to flee it. He would much rather prefer to stand up to his fate than fly from it. In this case, fate does win over as most of the characters, Antonio included, are eventually brutally murdered. This echo scene thus serves as Webster’s masterful attempt at exploring the

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limitations of death and the nature of fate in the lives of humans. The prevailing role of fate is most beautifully captured by Bosola in his final musings at the closing of the play: "We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and banded/Which way please them." (5.4.54-55).

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