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## Hubris in The Duchess of Malfi

In John Webster's tragic play *The Duchess of Malfi*, the titular character is undoubtedly subjected to great degrees of suffering, both physical and mental. However, it is less clear whether or not she can be viewed simply as an innocent victim. While it can indeed be argued that the Duchess provides an example of good people being made to suffer by the evil of an imperfect world, she can also be contrarily viewed as unwittingly contributing to her own downfall in fitting with the Aristotelian ideas of tragedy. To view the Duchess as a character who destroys herself can be to view her as a generally moral person who falls prey to her own hamartia, be it an error in judgement or rashness. Alternatively, it can be to view her as a character that brings about her downfall through moral discrepancies such as lust, selfishness or excessive pride or hubris. This latter portrait is one of a character who is deserving of her fate, as her suffering comes to be seen as a punishment rather than an instance of unjust persecution.

It is tempting to argue that the duchess herself is the culprit of her own downfall, due to her poor choices and actions. David Mann clearly lays the blame on the Duchess's shoulders as he suggests that "unlike other heroines who are passive victims of men's cruelty or misapprehensions the Duchess creates her own tragedy by her actions, quite wittingly, preferring to live her sexual life to the full and, knowing what they are, to risk the consequences"[1]. In this sense, it can be deduced that lust is the Duchess's tragic flaw or hamartia, and her inability to resist its temptation paves the way to her ultimate destruction. Indeed, it is her secret affair and marriage with Antonio which leads directly to her decidedly tragic death and suffering as it serves to provoke the wrath of Ferdinand and the Cardinal. She disobeys her brothers' wishes for her to remain a chaste widow, for which they inflict torture and murder on her in return. Of course, along with the notion that the Duchess causes her own suffering, may too come the idea of her deserving it for being, in Ferdinand's words, a "whore"[2] who embodies corruption and indecency. Indeed, her language to Antonio is often sexually suggestive, for example when she tells him she "is flesh and blood...not the figure cut in alabaster...Kneels at [her] husband's tomb" (14). Here the imagery of her flesh delineates her seductive nature as she offers her body to a second husband in direct defiance of her brothers. Philip Stevick supports this view as he argues that "Here we have a protagonist whose character is essentially unsympathetic, in that [their] goals and purposes are repugnant"[3]. This statement highlights the arguable obscenity of the Duchess's desires and the way in which her suffering could be rendered well deserved. It can also be seen that, along with her sinful acts of lust, the Duchess also suffers from a degree of hubris in the form of pride. Indeed, she holds the conviction that she should be able to choose her own partner, and refuses to bow to her brothers' wishes. She defies social norms by proposing to Antonio, suggesting that her pride

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renders her unwilling to exist as her brothers' claim to a royal bloodline, and she deems herself worthy and capable of taking on the masculine role in her courtship of Antonio. It can be argued that the Duchess's power leads her to develop an inflated sense of self, believing herself to be exempt from the expectations placed on her both as a female and as a ruler. This assumption can be seen as her error in judgement, and her excessive pride as her fatal flaw.

It can be argued that the Duchess is also guilty of discarding her public duties in favour of a sexually driven marriage with the social inferior she has fallen in love with. She makes her priorities clear just before she proposes to Antonio, as she tells him that she is "making [her] will as 'tis fit princes should" (12). This statement can be interpreted as the Duchess suggesting that the personal endeavour of courting and marrying Antonio is her true duty rather than her political duties and public obligations. From this view the Duchess is guilty too of possessing a weakness of character, as she seems to lack the necessary willpower to put the importance of leadership in front of her own personal desires. The Duchess, as the leader of a nation, can be viewed as having two separate sides. There is her physical body and personal life, and then there is her political side or body politic. By focussing her primary goals and attentions on Antonio, the Duchess shows herself to be far more concerned with the needs of her private physical body than the duties of her body politic. It is notable that the complete loss of control and power at the hands of her brothers' can be seen as a fitting punishment for her abuse and neglect of political power. She does not respect her position of power and so it is taken from her, along with the power to protect those she loves. The loss of her husband and her children can all be seen as consequences of her selfishness and disregard for her duties. She seduces Antonio into living a provocative secret life with her, and one which ultimately gets him murdered. Meanwhile, her children actually stand as a physical product of the sexual actions which arguably render the Duchess guilty of irresponsibility and selfishness. It can be deemed that the Duchess's children are born at the expense of her nation, as she is more preoccupied with her motherly responsibility for her children than her public responsibility for her people. The nature of the Duchess's relationship with Antonio has in itself two conflicting sides, much like the Duchess and her priorities. Antonio is not only the object of her lust and later her husband, he also holds a political position in her court as her steward. Politically and socially he stands as her inferior, but the Duchess knowingly breaks custom and public expectation by raising him up to be her marital equal. On this note, the act of marrying beneath herself can also be seen as the primary driving force of her brothers' wrath, and therefore the root cause of the Duchess' tragic fate. This idea is supported by the conversation between the Duchess, Ferdinand and the Cardinal during which the Cardinal warns her that remarriage to someone who is not a noble like her first husband would "sway [her] high blood" (9). From this comment it is evident that the two brothers have personally concerned themselves with protecting their sister's royal blood by way of making sure it remains untainted by remarriage to a suitor of a lesser social class. Theodora A. Jankowski supports this standpoint by stating that "the very nature of her marriage is so revolutionary and challenges social custom to such a degree that the Duchess must be

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punished for her audacity in creating it”[4]. Indeed, the Duchess not only breaks custom by marrying beneath herself, particularly as she is a figure of political power, but also by taking on what would have been perceived as the ‘male’ role in the relationship in a Jacobean context.

From another viewpoint, the Duchess is still to blame for her own downfall, not just because of her lustful nature or disloyalty to her duties but because of her decision to juggle both situations at once. From this standpoint her true error is rashness, as she carries out a secret marriage, becomes a mother to children, and tries to keep her position as Duchess without thinking of the possible consequences of this collision of priorities. In contrast to the idea of her choosing lust over duty, it seems that she actually chooses both lust and leadership. It can be seen that it is this impossible attempt at maintaining two journeys down conflicting paths which causes her life to unravel into what Stevick refers to as “Well deserved misfortune”[5]. From this standpoint, the path of duty is only feasible in a situation where the Duchess either remains a widow, or remarries to someone fitting of her own social standing. On the contrary, the Duchess instead marries Antonio for love and attraction as oppose to social responsibility and duty. Along with this ill-advised attempt at a double life, the duchess can also be seen to be guilty of a severe error of judgement in regards to her brothers’ capabilities for evil. As Marliiss C. Desens argues “she initially underestimates the lengths to which her male relatives will go when they perceive her as slipping out of their control”[6]. Indeed, while she is aware that her brothers will disapprove, she tells Antonio that if they were to find out “time will easily/ Scatter the tempest” (14). She acknowledges that marrying beneath her may provoke her brothers’ anger, but does not realise that their need to control her goes a lot deeper than simply choosing her husband for her.

The very fact that the Duchess possesses the power to rule can be seen as enough in itself to taint her moral image and colour her as the cause of her own well deserved downfall in the context of a Jacobean society. Therefore, although choosing love over duty is sometimes seen as her fatal mistake, dedication to the throne may have been just as catastrophic. Lisa Hopkins supports this reasoning by stating that, in Renaissance England, “Female government is by its very nature seen as inherently monstrous, as indeed is suggested by Knox when he compares female government to a monstrous body politic with no proper head”[7]. Indeed, Knox’s rejection of female rule predates Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* by about three decades, and it epitomizes the aversion to the placement of women in positions of authority which remained to some extent throughout the early modern period. The reference to the body politic metaphor which compares a nation and its people to a living body, together with the assertion that a government or ‘body’ under female rule is inherently deformed and monstrous, certainly suggests that the Duchess’s leadership is a destructive and corrupting plague upon herself, her country and her people. The portrait painted by Knox holds further implications for the character of the Duchess as he describes the female lead body politic as being without a head. This suggests that, like all female rulers, the Duchess is intellectually and inherently incapable of

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success, rendering her failure not only self-imposed but also ultimately inevitable based purely on her gender. Hopkins outlines this view of women as being incapable of achieving anything substantial as she notes that “What the Duchess does would not be wrong if she were a private person; the implication is, therefore, that if a woman is put in a position of public responsibility, she must either violate her own nature or transgress against her duties”[8]. Indeed, the romance between the Duchess and Antonio is arguably immoral largely because of the Duchess’s responsibility to protect the royal bloodline with which she rules over the nation. Her marriage and sexual relations with Antonio not only violate this bloodline, but also distract her from her obligation to dedicate herself to her country and her people. Moreover, Knox summarised his reasoning behind his denunciation of female rulers using Biblical references of God’s creation of Adam and Eve. For example, in his sixteenth century book *The History of the Reformation of Scotland* Knox wrote “First, I say, the woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man, not to rule and command him”[9]. The religious connotations of women being “made” to be subservient hold implications for the morality of the Duchess, the implication being that in renouncing her God given position in favour of ruling, she deserves her suffering as a form of divine punishment or justice. Therefore, from a purely Christian basis the Duchess surely does bring misfortune on herself through her actions and their respective consequences, but these consequences come as a punishment from God himself as oppose to simply being the logical outcome of cause and effect.

However, the apparent impression of the Duchess being to blame for her own downfall is likely to be more a product of the play and the playwright’s original time period, as opposed to being due to any true fault on the part of the character. The portrayal of a powerful woman who makes her own choices and resists the restraints of Jacobean patriarchy would have been deemed controversial and provocative within its original seventeenth century context. Mann emphasizes this point as he states that “It is a unique portrait well in advance of its time, and one, arguably, that transcends the restrictive polarization of women to which even Shakespeare very largely subscribed”[10]. It can be argued that it is this diversion from gender role norms which once made the Duchess appear as a kind of abomination, destroying herself by rejecting her expected submissive nature. In other words, the suffering of the Duchess appears to be self-inflicted or well-deserved only when placed against the backdrop of a Jacobean society and its oppressively rigid expectations of both real and fictional females. It is not only the audience’s perception of the Duchess which would have been influenced by this society but also Webster’s portrayal and treatment of the character and her actions. This treatment, unlike an outdated audience perception, endures even in contemporary society as it comes through in language and tone. As Emma Smith argues, the play “certainly does not perpetuate the moralising [of the Duchess being a whore who deserved her suffering], but nor does it completely recast the play’s central couple as heroic”[11]. However, whilst the character of the Duchess is, to some extent, coloured negatively due to her being an autonomous and powerful female character who is a product of a male orientated time period, there is also a contrasting sense of her as being a

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sympathetic character. Leah S. Marcus disputes the idea of seventeenth century audiences seeing the Duchess as an immoral and self-destructing character as she argues that “Despite – or because of – her clandestine marriage and its aftermath, the Duchess of Malfi aroused a sympathetic response among many Londoners even decades after the work in which she appears was written and first performed”[12]. Smith gives an example of a scene which outlines the play’s more positive impressions of the Duchess and her morality as she states that “The death of Cariola, begging for mercy, seems designed to emphasize the Duchess’s self-possession and grace”[13]. Indeed, when juxtaposed against the pitiful begging of her handmaiden who rants that she is “not prepar’d for it” and that she “will not die...must not” (66), the Duchess’s dignified acceptance of her own death reinforces her as both a sympathetic character and as an admirable one. Smith acknowledges the dual impression of the Duchess in terms of morality and of her choices and actions as she argues that “The play’s inconsistent attitudes towards the Duchess may suggest its own struggle with what she represents, and the impossibility of reconciling her aspiration to self-governance with the patriarchal world in which she, and her Jacobean audience, largely live”[14]. Certainly, although the integrity of her actions is often questionable, it must be taken into consideration that these moral misgivings may well be necessary for her to free herself from the oppression of the males in her life.

In spite of the arguments portraying the Duchess as a character who falls prey to her own hubris, the more convincing view concerning the cause of her suffering is that it is not her fault. Overall she comes across simply as an innocent victim of external evils. The most poignant of these evils is the human cruelty of her brothers, who directly destroy most everything the Duchess holds dear to her, before ultimately ending her life. In the case of Ferdinand, the ‘punishment’ he inflicts on his sister has little to do with what she has or hasn’t done, and has everything to do with Ferdinand’s own flawed and deeply warped nature. Martin White argues that “Ferdinand’s desire for his sister borders on the incestuous, though his feelings are in no way returned by the Duchess”[15]. Indeed, many critics interpret Ferdinand’s obsession with his sister’s destruction as being driven not by social class concerns or anger over his sister’s disloyalty, but rather by an unrequited sexual attraction to her. Indeed, on more than one occasion he uses his dagger as a tool of intimidation against his sister. This dagger can be viewed as a phallic symbol, and the way in which he uses it to threaten her as holding sexual undertones. The threat of penetrating her flesh with a phallic object is quite possibly a metaphor for his true threat of a rape motivated by his need to sexually possess her. From this view, the Duchess is completely blameless in her downfall, as her only contributing traits or acts are those which she cannot help, namely being a woman and being attractive. She is ultimately forced to endure untold suffering simply because of Ferdinand’s bitterness and jealousy towards her marriage to another man, together with his hope that destroying her will destroy the perverse and forbidden feelings of lust which he may or may not be fully aware of himself. The emergence of Ferdinand’s delusion of lycanthropy supports this notion of incestuous undertones in his character, as his ‘transformation’ occurs shortly after his sister is murdered.

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Having dominated her physical body by ending her life, the 'beast' which emerges can be seen as being symbolic of a forbidden sexual desire towards his sister which is finally released by her death. Even if this incestuous view of Ferdinand's intentions is to be rejected, and he and the Cardinal are indeed concerned with their sister's social class and purity of their bloodline, it remains unfair that the Duchess is forced to suffer for their fixations.

Of a wider significance, the innocent Duchess is a victim not only of her brothers, but of patriarchy in general. She has come to be in a most unique position for a woman of the seventeenth century, in that she is both largely autonomous as a widow and in control of her deceased husband's court. It is this autonomy and power which ultimately renders her as a target in a largely patriarchal society. Her brother's symbolise the crushing oppression of patriarchy on women and their desire for freedom, as supported by Dr Sarah E Johnson who argues that Webster's play "shows men obsessively trying to control a woman's body, and a woman attempting to recover the body, at least to some extent, from the damage of this control"[16]. The brothers seek to control her physical body, first by denying her bodily pleasures by ordering her to remain chaste, and later by denying her physical life by quite literally strangling the life from her. Indeed, as the Duchess's title offers her some political authority over her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal use violence as a means of rebalancing their family dynamic to once again fit the model of patriarchy, with the female sibling being crushed by the domineering weight of the male siblings. The aforementioned phallic symbol of Ferdinand's dagger not only holds undertones of incestuous desire but also of the mechanics of patriarchy. This is evident as Ferdinand tells the Duchess that it was "[their] father's poniard" (10), and is therefore a symbol of patriarchy which has been passed down from father to son. This can be seen to demonstrate, through this use of symbolism, the way in which the control of females in the seventeenth century was passed down from their fathers to either their husbands or to their brothers. Despite her tendency to reject tradition, the Duchess does not completely separate herself from these patriarchal restrictions, as she makes every effort to keep her marriage a secret from her brothers. In this way, she realises her restrictions as a woman and attempts to work around them without submitting to them. This is an important point in light of the view that the Duchess could be at fault for keeping her marriage a secret, as she would not have been forced to do so if not for the oppression of patriarchy.

Of course, while the oppressive force of patriarchy and the wrath of her brothers can be viewed as the primary causes of the Duchess's suffering, there is also the idea that human cruelty and societal oppression are just two harsh aspects of a deeply flawed and imperfect world. The character of Bosola, although a villain himself, subscribes to the belief that living in the world and, more specifically, human society is an unpleasant experience. He describes life itself as a "general mist of error" (65), suggesting that humanity is the result of a random accident and therefore rejecting the Christian idea of Divine creation. He goes on to imply that we are born for no reason other than to suffer and die, which is evident as he juxtaposes the image of death as

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“a hideous storm of terror” (65) against the calm yet depressingly bleak imagery of the meaningless mist of life. This is indeed largely reminiscent of the Duchess’s experience of life during the novel. After she presumably finds freedom from her husband with his death, she still lives under the oppressive ‘mist’ of the evils of a society obsessed with social standing and self-interest. These warped values are ones which can still be deemed relevant even in contemporary society. From this view, the Duchess does not bring the suffering on herself, but is rather inevitably doomed to suffer along with the rest of humanity. Alternatively, it can be argued that her suffering is not inevitable in general, but inevitable because of her innocence and kindness. Rather than being rewarded for this, she is tortured and murdered, demonstrating the way in which those with positive virtues and characteristics are destroyed by those who are corrupt and evil. Northrop Frye adheres to this idea that the Duchess is a light of goodness amidst the darkness of cruelty as he states that “the Duchess has the innocence of abundant life in a sick and melancholy society”[17]. Indeed, she values the modest ideals of love and motherhood over the deplorable ideals of power and controlling others and ultimately she is destroyed because of this. Therefore, it is not the Duchess herself who brings on her catastrophe but rather the unjust triumph of evil over good and corruption over innocence which prevails in an imperfect world.

In conclusion, the view that the Duchess is a character who causes her own suffering through her hubris or hamartia is ultimately unconvincing and weak. The implication of such a view is that it is essentially a form of victim blaming, looking to justify the actions of the Duchess’ sadistic brothers rather than to highlight them as the clear villains. While she as a character is not perfect, as she irresponsibly lives two separate lives and tends to fall prey to human weaknesses such as desire and love, she is still not to blame for her own downfall as any hubris she may be deemed guilty of greatly pales in comparison to the cruelty of the characters she is surrounded by, together with the degree of her suffering. Instead, she is persecuted because of her brothers’ patriarchy fuelled desires for control and their obsession with the purity of their family bloodline. The play paints a perfect portrait of how the innocent are not spared the cruelty of an imperfect world, and in actual fact suffer more for their innocence as they become victims of, and used as pawns by, others who are crueller and more corrupt than themselves.

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