
Merit in The Duchess of Malfi

“Her days are practis’d in such noble virtue,
That, sure her nights, nay more, her very sleeps,
Are more in heaven, than other ladies’ shrifts.
Let all sweet ladies break their flatt’ring glasses,
And dress themselves in her” – (1.2.123-127)

These eulogizing words are spoken by Antonio in what is contextually the first mention of the duchess in the play. Even though these lines happen to come from one who is obviously enamoured by the Duchess’s charm, it is clear that she is seen to be an exemplum for other women. Furthermore, this entire speech contrasts the Duchess against her brothers, as an individual who deserves her high position and not merely by virtue of birth. This juxtaposition of the attitudes towards merit and degree remains a constant theme in the play, right from the beginning when Antonio lauds the French court for its meritocratic approach. Therefore, the Duchess at one level symbolically stands as a beacon for noble spirit against orthodox societal notions such as those of hierarchy and gender, embodied in the negative characters of her brothers. As Anand Prakash puts forth in his introduction, the duchess is seen as “an all-inspiring entity on the strength of her bold assertion of individual entity”. Even her death seems to “reaffirm her nature of uncompromising persistence with the ideals she has cherished all along.”

Throughout the play, the Duchess comes across to be a spirited and resolute woman as seen in her resolve in going against her brothers’ wishes: “If all my royal kindred lay in my way unto this marriage: I’ll’d make them my low foot-steps”. Through her second marriage she defies her brothers’ orthodox and irrational views, which could be recognized as a reflection of popular notions of the time, and thus, through the Duchess, Webster could be seen to be making a point regarding the circumstances of his time. While this could clearly be interpreted as embracing the feminist cause, Lisa Jardine asserts that instead of a ‘true heroine’, the Duchess is merely a “transposition of a complex of attitudes towards women into a travesty of seventeenth-century womanhood” She further goes on to brutally dissect the Duchess’s character and Webster’s intent in typical twentieth century feminist fashion. However, what must be kept in mind is that Webster wrote the play in the seventeenth century inspired from a true story about a woman with all the odds stacked against her, such that in the end, she had no recourse but to willingly

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accept her fate. Jardine herself admits that the Duchess does come across as a convincing portrayal even if given from a distinctively male viewpoint.

In her forthright proposal to Antonio, it is evident that the Duchess is fully aware of the situation and the consequences of her decision. While Antonio, is deemed inferior by birth, the Duchess too is marginalized by virtue of being born a woman in a patriarchal society, even if her position is somewhat elevated thanks to her degree. Yet, in her defiance, she takes a clear stance echoing a faith in justice and a confidence in her own self, even if they both turn to be somewhat vain: "All discord, without this circumference, is only to be pitied, and not fear'd". Thus, in the proposal one finds a conscious subtle reversal of gender notions where Antonio comes across as timid and fearful while the Duchess plays the 'masculine' part, as suggested by critics. This view is further strengthened by Antonio's retort: "These words should be mine, and all the parts you have spoke". The Duchess then goes on to glorify the stature of love by questioning mere rituals and ceremony: "How can the Church build faster? We now are man and wife, and 'tis the Church that must but echo this."

James Calderwood further claims, "the Duchess's intent in the wooing scene is to divest herself of her role as social better, to discard degree, to establish herself and Antonio as equals", which is concurrent to John Selzer's view, "the Duchess decides to violate degree not out of weakness or passion or naiveté, but because she wishes – like Webster – to promote in Malfi a new ethic, one rooted in the primacy of worth over degree". These opinions can be corroborated through numerous instances in the text such as when the Duchess seeks to symbolically emulate the French court by asking Antonio to wear his hat in her presence. Therefore, as discussed before, the Duchess is seen to try and herald a new order of merit and fairness in the Italian court, which is given to nepotism and sycophancy. Moreover, the Duchess holds on to her views even while being at the mercy of Bosola and Ferdinand, as corroborated by her 'Salmon and Dog-fish' tale and her declaration: "Man is most happy, when's own actions be arguments and examples of his virtue"

Even in the face of imminent danger, the Duchess demonstrates remarkable courage, as when confronted by Ferdinand, she claims, "Whether I am doom'd to live, or die, I can do both like a prince," and in her eventual execution, she proves the veracity of her statement. Furthermore, she goes on to try and calmly appeal to Ferdinand's logic but of course her efforts prove ineffectual against Ferdinand's dogmatic rage. Also, it is more than evident that the Duchess possesses a sharp and prudent mind complementing her courage and determination, as witnessed through her instantaneous concoction and artifice while sending Antonio off to Ancona or later to Milan:

"A behaviour so noble, as gives a majesty to adversity", these words mark Bosola's imminent change of heart, for the Duchess's noble charm affects even the cold, calculative and objective

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character in the play. As vouched by Bosola, even in her confinement, the Duchess maintains her level-headed grace, as she gradually realizes the inevitability of fate and thus comes to accept the same: "Necessity makes me suffer constantly, and custom makes it easy...I am chain'd to endure all your tyranny." As the moment of her death finally approaches, the Duchess is seen to have reconciled herself to the play of events and in fact, stresses a certain optimism for the life that lay ahead "Who would be afraid on't (death)? Knowing to meet such excellent company in th'other world"; and in her plaintive speech to Cariola and her noble last words, Webster's sensitivity to the tragic heroine is there for all to see. As Robert Ornstein explains, "the Duchess's self-possession in the face of death is a spiritual victory rather than a glorious defeat; a vindication of the value of action and virtue."

After her death, the play is seen to somewhat disintegrate into parallels and perversions of tragedy to further highlight her noble character. As Jacqueline Pearson states, "The society she leaves behind her is negative and sterile", and in the Duchess's figurative and spectral presence in Act V, Pearson finds "a constant poignant reminder of a better way of living." While John Selzer concludes that the Duchess is finally vindicated through the triumph of the order of merit espoused by her, it is somewhat a biased interpretation keeping in mind the ambiguous nature of the conclusion, for Selzer seems to have forgotten that the Duchess's real heir was her son from her first marriage. As a result, though the play seems to have reached a somewhat bittersweet climax, there is a hint of further darkness raising the question whether justice and merit do indeed prevail. Whether Webster intentionally included this ambivalence or was it a mere oversight on his part is of course debatable. However, it is undeniable that in the Duchess, he creates a magnificent heroine who shines forth both as a icon and as an individual in the face of a dogmatic society, such that despite all the atrocities, she retains her glorious stature in the readers' imagination. As a result, her passionate avowal rings true in all its intensity:

"I am Duchess of Malfi still."

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