

---

## The Role-play and Identity in John Milton's and John Webster's Works

The writers of the early modern period often presented in their texts characters who struggled with a crisis of identity. Furthermore, these characters were unable to reconcile their identity with the role that they played within the fictional world they inhabited. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example, the character of Satan struggles with the subtext of performing the role of antagonist in the poem, a role which stems from the uncertainty of his identity due to his opposition to God and his fall from heaven. In a contrasting manner, *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster presents a central character who accepts her role as an individual of power fully, even going so far as to defy contemporary perceptions of gender and class in the process, all due to the absolute certainty she has in her identity. It is clear to see that within the early modern period writers attempted to resolve tensions between role-play and identity, resulting in both positive and negative portrayals of the relationship between the two.

The Satan of *Paradise Lost* is often interpreted as a romantic hero, his portrayal being compared to that of Prometheus, Odysseus or Achilles, Lucy Newlyn noting that 'Satan is measured according to the heroic standards embodied in classical epic, romance and tragedy'[1]. Satan's portrayal stems from Milton's manipulation of these 'heroic standards' and the literary conventions used by writers such as Homer and Virgil to present their classical heroes. These conventions range from the poem opening *in media res* on Satan to Satan being given the longest speeches, being paid the most attention by the poet and having his motives and intentions being explored with greater detail than the other characters of the poem. The imagery used to depict Satan, furthermore, presents him as both dynamic and relatable through a worrying amount of humanity. After his opening speech in Book I where he recounts the fall from heaven, Satan is described as being an 'apostate angel, though in pain, / vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair'[2]. 'Apostate angel' is something of a contradictory, if not paradoxical, title, but puts forward the image of an angel who has truly abandoned the forces that govern a Christian universe. 'Vaunting' is similarly contradicted by 'racked with deep despair', Satan thus exhibiting a sense of denial about the absolute hopelessness of his situation, instead opting to remain determined to succeed in achieving autonomy from God. Satan is immediately presented as being inherently contradictory, conscious of his defeat but adamant to deny it. The reader is thus prone to sympathize with Satan, viewing him as something of a defeated underdog.

The physical appearance of Satan further portrays him as a sympathetic hero, Milton describing him as being:

---

### Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

'above the rest

In shape and gesture proudly eminent

Stood like a tower; his form had not yet lost

All her original brightness, nor appeared

Less than archangel ruined, and the excess

Of glory obscured'. (1.589 – 594)

Satan is 'proudly eminent' despite his defeat, suggesting that the devils and angels who fought, and lost, beside him still view him with high esteem. Furthermore, it is clear to see that he is something of a glorious figure, able to captivate both the reader and his army of followers. There is also a sense of hope for the reader who may sympathise with him, but is conscious of his inherent villainy, that he still retains some of the 'original brightness' that defined him as an angel of God, suggesting that there is hope he may return to having good intentions. Satan is both physically and mentally captivating, riddled with anguish and denial but presenting himself visually to the reader and to his peers as proud and determined despite defeat. Milton's Satan is thus rejecting the traditional role he is associated with as a wholly evil and morally corrupt figure, instead becoming a dynamic and sympathetic hero.

The uncertain and contradictory nature of Satan is a stark contrast to the Duchess of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Duchess inherits all of the political influence of her husband following his death and thus becomes something of an exceptional woman within Renaissance Italy; a single woman with immeasurable power. She utilizes her newfound power in order to become fully autonomous and independent, free to make her own decisions and carve out her own path in life. 'I am making my will, as 'tis fit princes should' [3] is said by the Duchess moments prior to her proposal to Antonio, the subject of her affections and a man of significantly lower social class. The Duchess asserts a direct relationship between the role of being a ruler and the ability, and power, to do as one wishes. She is able to 'make her will', a statement that can be read on two levels. First, that free from the influence of her husband she is the one who determines her aspirations and goals, not anybody else. Secondly, by being a 'prince' she is able to go one step further than merely intellectually forming her own will, but actually achieves her goals and gets what she wants in reality. In a manner that almost creates a caricature of obnoxious male rulers, such as her brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal who do as they wish without considering consequences, the Duchess begins to define herself by her title and the power that is associated with it. For all intents and purposes, the Duchess fully inhabits the role of a 'prince', openly conscious of her ability to do as she wishes.

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

There is a sense, however, that the Duchess performs the role of ruler in a manner that differs greatly from that of the other characters in the play that are in positions of power, her brothers. Both Ferdinand and the Cardinal are presented as misusing their power, exploiting their roles as aristocrats to allow them to be as detestable, abusive and abhorrent as possible. While both characters are shown as capitalizing upon the inherent sexism of the period, they abuse their privileged positions in different ways. Ferdinand is shown as using his power to validate his personality and protect his fragile, yet enormous, ego. 'Methinks you that are courtiers should be my touchwood: take fire when I give fire, that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty' (1.1.124-126) is an example of how Ferdinand exploits his influence over those who surround him to create the illusion that he is a likeable and popular ruler. This, of course, has the opposite effect, Ferdinand becoming to both the other characters and the audience an entirely unlikeable individual who acts on petty, often incestuous and malicious motives and lacks the humanity necessary for the audience to sympathize with him. The Cardinal, furthermore, abuses the power associated with his role as a religious leader to carry out political schemes. The first description we have of the Cardinal comes from Antonio, who says 'Where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than ever was imposed on Hercules, as he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters.' (1.1.160-163) Both Ferdinand and the Cardinal are presented by Webster as villains, their misuse of the power connected to their roles as leaders putting them in direct contrast to their sister.

The Duchess herself exhibits both the inflated sense of power that is associated with the role as leader, but also the positive attributes that we, as the audience, see as necessarily present in the ideal leader. The Duchess is presented throughout the play as a pious, gentle mannered yet unapologetic character, who fully accepts the consequences of her actions despite being conscious of the unjust motives behind these consequences. Even when she faces her own death, she accepts her fate with a stoic, composed manner. Her final words before her murder show this composed demeanor:

'Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength

Must pull down heaven upon me

[...] Come, violent death,

Serve for mandragora, to make me sleep'. (4.2.237-232)

The Duchess makes no allusion to feelings of hatred towards her brothers in her final moments nor does she confess to regret her actions. Instead she merely requests a quick and easy death, accepting her fate fully, Kim Solga going as far as to say that the attitude the 'Duchess

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

[expresses] makes towards a martyr's calm'.[4] The Duchess performs her role as ruler so completely that she doesn't question her fate, she accepts the negative consequences that may stem from a position of power. This 'martyr's calm', however, is not the only aspect of the Duchess that represents her humility before her death, she also shows great appreciation to her devoted servant Cariola:

'Farewell, Cariola.

In my last will I have not much to give;

A many hungry guests have fed upon me.

Thine will be a poor reversion.' (4.2.194-197)

The Duchess voices her regret at not being able to repay Cariola for her service and, despite being faced with the immediacy of her own mortality, offer her apologies to her uncompensated, and similarly doomed, servant. The Duchess, in her final moments, thus shows that she performs the role of ruler with compassion and humility. In comparison to her brothers, the Duchess comes to serve as the ruler the audience would prefer; kind, humble and considerate of others. The manner in which the Duchess fulfills her role stems from her highly progressive identity, her character being one that defies traditional conceptions of gender and class.

This identity that the Duchess carves for herself is undeniably headstrong and fearless. She secretly marries and has children with a lower class man despite the fact that marriage alone, disregarding the class of the suitor, is seen as unsavory for a widow to engage in, not to mention that she has been forbidden to marry again by her brothers. The Duchess, in a bold manner, makes no effort to disguise her humanity or the sexual desires that come with it: 'This is flesh and blood, sir; / 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb.' (1.1.454-456) The Duchess refuses to be defined solely as her husband's widow, instead asserting herself as a living woman, the sensuous imagery and sexual tone of 'flesh and blood' hinting towards her desire to independently decide her sexuality and a disregard for her brothers selfish wishes. Furthermore, the Duchess shows an open disregard for the boundaries that class creates between herself and the focus of her desire, Antonio:

'This goodly roof of yours is too low built;

I cannot stand upright in't, nor discourse,

Without I raise it higher. Raise yourself,

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

Or, if you please, my hand to help you'. (1.1.1417-420)

The Duchess is aware of the difficulties that class presents to her relationship with Antonio, that there is a metaphorical glass ceiling over his head that she cannot symbolically 'stand upright' underneath; he is too lowly to stand next to her and she is too grand to stoop to his level. She realizes that in order for their relationship to be based on equality and mutual respect she must elevate his class through marriage. The Duchess, therefore, crosses two boundaries in her relationship with Antonio: first the one created by class differences and the second by defying the typical image of the grieving widow. Dymrna Callaghan notes that through her marriage to Antonio the Duchess is 'undermining differentiation at the levels of both gender and class'[5]. The Duchess's identity is defined by a need to undermine the forces that intend to control her life, whether they be the celibate image of the widow, the expectations of the upper class or the wishes of her brothers. She is, at her core, a rebel opposed to that which attempts to control her, a rebellious nature that is projected onto her role as an autonomous yet gracious ruler.

Satan, like the Duchess, can also be interpreted as a rebel, though his motivations are somewhat more uncertain. Satan's questioning of his role as villain, his attempt to redefine himself as a romantic hero, is a direct result of his lack of certainty in himself and his own identity. Satan's identity, and how the reader perceives him as a character, is determined by his quest for separation and autonomy from God. It is Satan's belief that it is 'Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven' (1.263) that defines him. This belief, which seems to the reader initially as a statement made with absolute certainty and earnestness, is itself full of contradictions and doubts.

Satan is dependent on the notion of free will as an opposition to predestination, two concepts that translate into freedom and control. In Book III, God the Father states that he made Satan 'Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall' (3.99), meaning that Satan made the conscious choice to rebel and thus to also fall from heaven. This projects the idea that those who reside in the universe are completely free to do as they wish. This idea, however, is contradicted by God the Father's ability to foresee the future:

'And now

Through all restraint broke loose he wings his way

Not far from heaven, in the precincts of light,

Directly towards the new created world,

And man there placed, with purpose to assay

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

If him by force he can destroy, or worse,

By some false guile pervert'. (1.86-92)

This passage shows that God foresees man falling as a consequence of Satan's action, yet we can see from the poem's conclusion that he does nothing to stop such a fate for his newest creation. God's ability of foresight hints towards the possibility of predestination, that events are designed to happen in a particular order with particular results and thus we, as subjects of the universe, have no choice but follow in such a divine performance. This contradicts any notion or definition of free will, that all autonomy we believe to possess is just an illusion. Satan's wish to 'reign in hell' is, therefore, a continuation of his serving in heaven, just at a greater distance from God. Satan's efforts to rebel, to repel the control of God and create his own independent identity are thus all in vain. He is doomed for failure, the identity he wishes to possess is impossible and thus the reader sympathizes with him and the role of villain is once again questioned.

Both the Duchess and Satan define themselves through their independence. Both of their identities are determined by their capability to rule as well as their independence, for the Duchess from her brother's sexual constraints and the perceptions of womanhood and for Satan from the influence of God. For the Duchess the ability to perform in the role of a ruler is something that she prides herself in. Even until the moment she dies the role she plays is her greatest achievement, this role being validated by her strong sense of identity and self. She is proudly able to say 'I am the Duchess of Malfi still.' (4.2.138) But, while the Duchess accepts and fully performs her role, Satan is more hesitant. On a sub-textual level, Satan is at odds with the reader's perception of him as a villain. Satan sees himself fulfilling the role not of antagonist but of hero, the individual denied freedom and autonomy. The way in which he is represented in the poem attempts to reconcile the relationship between his identity and the role that the reader projects onto him, to create a harmony between the two. For Satan, role-play and identity exist unharmoniously, a constant conflict between himself and the reader. For the Duchess there is no conflict, she is aware that her identity and role coexist and complement each other, the audience perceiving her in all the glory that she aspires to.

## Works Cited

[1] Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pg.70

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

[2] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.125 -126

[3] John Webster, 'The Duchess of Malfi', *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. by David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katherine Eisaman, Maus and Eric Rasmussen, (York: W. W. Norton & Company), 1.1.377

[4] Kim Solga, *Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pg. 104

[5] Dymrna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pg. 150

gradesfixer.com

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)