



The Duchess of Malfi

BY JOHN WEBSTER

JOHN WEBSTER(1570-1624)

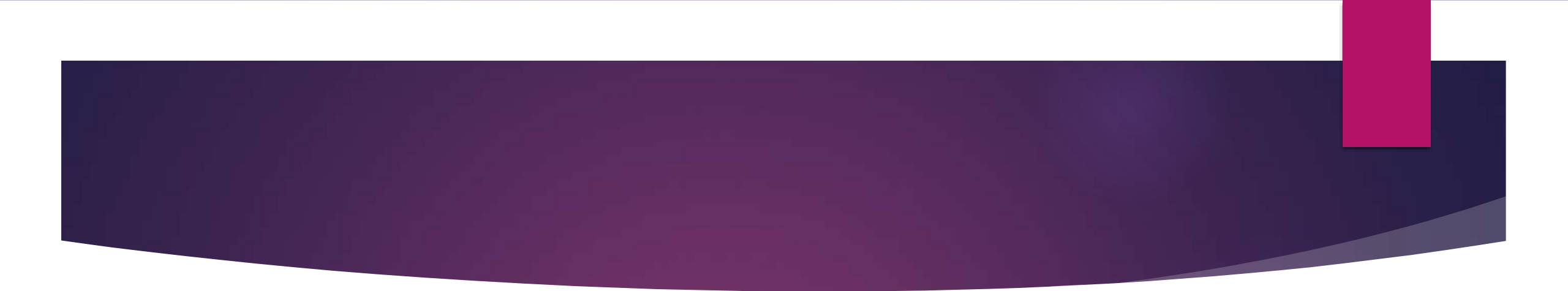
- ▶ Known for his tragedies
- ▶ Early is an early Jacobean dramatist.
- ▶ Often collaborated with other playwrights including Michael Drayton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton and Anthony Munday.
- ▶ Tragedies : “The White Devil” (1612), “The Duchess of Malfi”- are often seen as a masterpieces of the early 17th century.
- ▶ His tragedies are very macabre (concerned with or causing a fear of death) and dark pieces that are also disturbing, which seemed to be the beginning of the Gothic Literature of the seventeenth century.
- ▶ Life was very obscure.

OVERVIEW

- ▶ Written in 1612-1613, Jacobean era.
- ▶ Jacobean revenge tragedy.
- ▶ Originally published as "The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfi"
- ▶ Based on a real story from 1500s. (War family in Italy) surrounding Giovanna d'Aragona, Duchess of Amalfi.
- ▶ It was first performed privately at the Blackfriars Theatre, then later to a larger audience at The Globe, in 1613-1614.
- ▶ Published in 1623.
- ▶ The play begins as a love story, when the Duchess marries beneath her class, and ends as a nightmarish tragedy as her two brothers undertake their revenge, destroying themselves in the process.
- ▶ Jacobean drama continued the trend of stage violence and horror set by Elizabethan tragedy, under the influence of Seneca.
- ▶ Most of Webster's work is quite dark, and has an element of horror and tragedy.
- ▶ The complexity of the play's character, particularly Bosola and the Duchess, and Webster's poetic language, have led many critics to consider The Duchess of Malfi among the greatest tragedies of English renaissance drama.
- ▶ Based in a time when women still had little power (even less so when the real story took place.)

SUMMARY

- ▶ The **Duchess** inherited her position from her dead husband, the Duke of Malfi.
- ▶ Her steward, **Antonio**, is in love with her.
- ▶ The Duchess has two brothers, **Cardinal** and **Ferdinand**, both who are corrupt and do not want their sister to remarry.
- ▶ They trick her into hiring **Bosola**, who act as a spy for them.
- ▶ The Duchess becomes interested in Antonio, and proposes.
- ▶ They decide to keep the marriage a secret.
- ▶ She gets pregnant though, Bosola determines she has remarried someone. She continues to have children with this mysterious man.
- ▶ The brothers know she's married but cant figure out to whom.

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- ▶ Ferdinand comes to Malfi court and confronts her in her bedroom. She tells him she's lawfully married, but he doesn't care.
 - ▶ The Duchess is now worried for her family, flees with Antonio and their kids.
 - ▶ Bosola finds out that she's married to him.
 - ▶ The brother's hunt her around Italy, and the Duchess and Antonio split up.
 - ▶ The Duchess and two of her children are caught and imprisoned.
 - ▶ Her brother tortures her and her children and has them strangled.
 - ▶ Bosola decides he doesn't agree with what brothers are doing, and vows to save Antonio and the one remaining child.
 - ▶ Cardinal contracts Bosola to kill Antonio, and Bosola resolves to save him.
 - ▶ Things go awry, and he ends up accidentally killing Antonio.
 - ▶ He resolves to avenge the family and kills Ferdinand and the Cardinal, wounds himself.
 - ▶ The surviving child is taken to Antonio's friend, who hopes the boy can inherit the title.

Key Characters

- Duchess- pleasant, gracious woman
- Antonio Bologna -steward
- Cardinal-dishonest, disagreeable person
- Ferdinand- (Duke of Calabria)
- Daniel de Bosola – manager of horses(spy)
- Delio
- Cariola
- Castruccio
- Julia
- The Count of Malateste

THEMES

Hell on Earth

- ▶ The Duchess of Malfi is a play replete with darkness, both literal and figurative. There are good figures, and these characters are associated with light. On the other hand, the brothers, who exhibit unrelenting evil, are associated with motifs of darkness, fire, the devil, and sin.
- ▶ The idea that the brothers have unleashed hell on Earth is most apparent in the fourth act, which includes utter horrors like fake corpses, a severed hand, a plethora of madmen, and most centrally, the vicious murders of the Duchess and her children. The Duchess, a symbol of motherhood and light, is unfazed by these horrors because she believes her family already dead, but she does explain that “the earth” seems made “of flaming sulphur” (4.2.26). And when Bosola tells her she must keep living, she makes it clear that hell is truly on Earth—“That’s the greatest torture souls feel in hell,/In hell: that they must live, and cannot die” (4.1.70-1),
- ▶ The Cardinal and Ferdinand are particularly responsible for bringing this fire to her world. Ferdinand is constantly associated with fire, by others and in his own language. He says only the Duchess’s “whore’s blood” can put out his “wild-fire” (2.5.46-7), he imagines killing her children by having them “burning in a coal-pit” (2.5.69), lighting “them like a match” after dipping them in “sulphur” (2.5.71-2). Additionally, he is associated with salamanders—at the time of the play, thought to live in fire—multiple times.
- ▶ Both brothers are also even more directly connected to hell through constant associations with the devil. Antonio says “the devil speaks in” (1.1.177) the Cardinal’s lips, and Bosola describes Ferdinand’s manipulation as: “Thus the devil/Candies all sins o’er” (1.1.266-7). These are but two of several instances.
- ▶ This hell on Earth serves to emphasize just how virtuous the Duchess is, and how much better for the world her kind of domestic love and child-rearing is than the greed and selfishness of her brothers. The hell that they create in the end destroys them, too—as Ferdinand says, “Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust” (5.5.72).[our sins and our own actions are responsible for our own downfall]Ferdinand goes mad, the Cardinal loses all hope, and both die, leaving no legacy behind them.

Disguise

- ▶ Disguise—masking reality, hiding one’s true intentions, presenting a false front—is a major theme in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The most obvious symbol of this is Bosola. The distinction between what he says and how he acts is so vast that even the audience, who is given access to his private thoughts through soliloquies and asides, has trouble understanding his motivations.
- ▶ He is a spy, and is thus constantly disguising his motives and his true feelings. Further, in the fourth act, he literally disguises himself as an old man. However, he also repeatedly shows disgust for the act of disguising. Thus, he is both the character who most thoroughly employs disguise, and the one most aware of its sinful, unattractive nature.
- ▶ Disguise is so prevalent in the play that even the Duchess, the paragon of light, must employ it. In her first appearance on stage, she tells her brothers, “I’ll never marry” (1.1.293), and then before the scene is even over, she has proposed to and married Antonio. Clearly, she had disguised her true intentions from them. She then manages to have three children with Antonio without ever revealing their marriage, and even when the discovery of the marriage becomes imminent, she quickly devises an excuse to send Antonio out of harm’s way.
- ▶ Yet this dishonesty is not meant to reflect poorly on the Duchess. Instead, it shows just how profoundly corrupt her brothers have made the world, in that the Duchess must disguise a good and pure love simply to survive. Her use of disguise reveals her energy and resourcefulness in her fight for what is good on this Earth.

The Fertile Woman

- ▶ Evil in "The Duchess of Malfi" is a powerful and pervasive force that manages to destroy almost all that is good, but it is not all-powerful. At the end of the play, the Duchess's oldest son survives to carry on her and Antonio's legacy, which provides a symbol of hope tied in with the play's greatest force for good: the fertile and reproductive female.
- ▶ Ferdinand and the Cardinal both express dark views on female sexuality. When they find out that the Duchess has a son, they cannot imagine this being the result of love, or of a legitimate marriage, but they instead imagine the boy as a product of wanton lust. Ferdinand goes so far as to describe the men he imagines having sex with his sister.
- ▶ The reality of a woman's fertility, though, is the complete opposite. After Antonio and the Duchess wed, she says they can remain chaste if he wants, suggesting that their marriage is not based on an all-consuming lust. They do, clearly, sleep together and produce three children, but this reflects only the loving creation of family. The scene in which Antonio, the Duchess, and Cariola tease each other reveals a comfortable domestic bliss, not a hotbed of fiery passion. And, also in this scene, the goodness of such a love is emphasized when Antonio berates Cariola for wanting to stay single. He argues that in Ovid's "Metamorphoses" (8 A.D Latin narrative poem by Roman poet, his magnum opus), those women who scorned love and lovers were turned into barren plants or stone, while those who married became fruitful trees, bestowing gifts to the world.
- ▶ Though Antonio's first description of the Duchess is arguably unrealistic, she is revealed through the play as figure very much of the earth. She is fat with pregnancy in the second act, "an excellent/Feeder of pedigrees" (3.1.5-6), and manages to birth three children over two acts. Even when she is about to die, rather than transition into a saintly figure, she retains her ties to the earth for one last moment, asking Cariola to give her son some cold medicine, and to let her daughter say her prayers. Her domestic duties remain paramount to her, even as she prepares to leave the earth forever.
- ▶ Once all the evil has been done, all that remains of this family that had epitomized domestic bliss is its eldest son. In the midst of all the destruction, this product of love and the reproductive woman, will be raised as a testament to the goodness of his mother. Thus, her power as a good mother, in the end, is greater than her brothers' evil.

Class

- ▶ The importance of class and rank is questioned throughout *The Duchess of Malfi*. Those characters who place the most value on it are those who do the most damage to the world of the play, while the Duchess fights for the idea that a man's worth is reflected by his actions and character, not by his title.
- ▶ The Duchess's marriage to Antonio is clearly a happy one, at least until exposed to the machinations of her brothers. They have three children and a clearly-expressed love for each other. Ferdinand and the Cardinal's disgust about her marriage is thus particularly repulsive, especially since their only specific complaint revolves around his lower class.
- ▶ Ironically, Bosola is first to defend the Duchess's choice to marry Antonio regardless of his class, although he is arguably lying when he does so. He takes it so far as to praise not just the Duchess, but their progressive age for allowing such a union, and he says that her example will spread hope to all those who aspire to rise above their natural station. His speech is tempered by the dramatic irony, the audience's knowledge that he is being disingenuous, and indeed, his success in fooling the Duchess by lavishing such praise on Antonio is what inspires her to confess her secret to him, a confession that will cost her her life.
- ▶ Count Malateste, for one—but many noble men are the “most wretch'd” (3.5.141), like her brothers. [Malateste is known for presenting himself as a soldier but avoiding any battles, and thus is scorned as a coward. Ferdinand recommends him to the Duchess as a suitable husband, but she scorns the idea.]

Take a position on where Bosola stands in the fight between good and evil in the play.

- ▶ Bosola is a complicated character in a play where most characters are obviously good or evil. His actions have dire consequences for the Duchess and her family, but unlike the Cardinal and Ferdinand, he shows reluctance to carry out these actions, and as he is essentially the only character who addresses the audience directly, we get a great sense of his internal struggle. This struggle is further represented in his complicated motivations, which veer from a seeming desire to do right by others to unfiltered self-interest. He is thus the character who represents the battle ground for the fight between good and evil, and though evil largely wins, he does manage in the end to eliminate all of the evil characters and pave the way so that the Duchess's surviving son can possibly grow up in a better world.

