

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, PhD

## ***The Duchess of Malfi* 1623**

John Webster 1576-1632

### SETTING

As imagination

The *Duchess of Malfi* is a Jacobean revenge tragedy written by John Webster in 1612-13. Published in 1623, it has an actual background, unlike the majority of the tragedies of its time. It is loosely based on events that occurred between 1508 and 1513 concerning the Duchess of Amalfi, whose father was an illegitimate son of Ferdinand I of Naples. After the death of her husband, she secretly remarried, but beneath her class, as in the play before us. The real life story, as in the play, is taken up by the terrible punishment brought down on the Duchess, by her infuriated brothers, when she married beneath her class. We are plunged into the seventeenth century version of honor killing, as we know it from Pakistan or Greece, today. We know that the revenge enacted, for such infractions of cultural norms, can bring out the worst brutality- and self-destruction, in the human repertoire.

Webster's choice of the present theme enabled him to imagine out from the Elizabethan fashion of the revenge tragedy. He is set upon a simple and direct theme, that of a charming and dignified lady, widowed and of high estate (a princess), who finds herself ready to remarry, but in fact is fatally attracted to one of her servants, from whom she receives a reciprocal passion. While the finest lines of this romance belong to the Duchess and her love, we are made to experience the play as a looming shipwreck, in which the brutal power inevitably rests with the thugs of successional order, in whose deep interests it is, that the widow should choose a mate of power and authority, through whom the power of the Amalfi kingdom can be secured and increased. The power with which Webster conducts this dramatic tragedy--and the lyric intensity with which he sustains two great characters--the Duchess and Bossola--generates a tragedy of Shakespearian magnitude.

### PLOT

The Duchess of Malfi, widowed, finds herself beset by unsuitable flattering courtiers. Although her brothers, one of them a cardinal, do everything possible to prevent her remarriage, which could mean loss of position and wealth for them, she goes with her heart, and arranges a secret marriage with her beloved and trusted servant, Antonio. The establishment comes to realize that the Duchess has three children by the still unidentified culprit. Bossola is given the job of discovering the unidentified lover. A series of whirlwind developments set in at this point.

Bossola finds out the truth about Antonio and reports it to the Cardinal. The Cardinal is enraged, and sends out a search party. Antonio and one of the children escape. But the Duchess, her younger children and the maid are captured, and strangled--a bloody outcome. In the wake of this disaster Bossola is horrified at what the two brothers have undertaken, and passes into a depression, a personal crisis of deep remorse. He has already proven himself of an elevated nature, and will in the end be the true revenge bearer, striving to bring justice to the cause of the Duchess. In a bloody brawl, Bossola mistakenly stabs Antonio to death. Bossola and the Cardinal stab each other to death. In the end Antonio's son arrives, to inherit the Duchess' wealth. The carnage is over, a new regime and outlook are revealed.

### CHARACTERS

THE DUCHESS. Far the protagonist of the play, dignified and independent after widowhood has left her vulnerable, she remains as long as possible witty and tender. She has three children by Antonio--her lover, new husband, and faithful servant. The finale of the drama forces us to experience the strangling of this lady--the height of the revenge enacted for the crime of upsetting her family dynastic.

Antonio returns from France with contempt for the French courtiers, whom he views as more corrupt than the English. This kind of value judgment characterizes the man, and is his leading point of attraction for the Duchess. His marriage to the Duchess is idealistic, based on true love, but bears heavy consequences; the marriage must be kept secret, and neither title nor money go to Antonio.

Delio is Antonio's best friend and confidant, throughout his complex marital experiences.

Daniel de Bossola is a convicted murderer, used by Fernando and the Cardinal--brothers of the Duchess--to spy on the Duchess. (He is involved in her murder,- and in the deaths of her children.) Unhappy and cynical, he is a shrewd judge of the culture of his time, as well as of the ups and downs of life on the planet. Cf. for equal brilliance Jacques in Shakespeare's *As you like It*.

The Cardinal. brother of the Duchess Corrupt, cold and determined, at any cost, to prevent the Duchess' remarriage. Cynical, like de Bossola, but far less understanding of the human condition.

Ferdinand, brother of the Duchess, ultimately turned into the imagination of a wolf, from remorse for the evil that he has inflicted on his sister.

Cariola, the Duchess' waiting woman, she too strangled at the same time as her mistress.

The doctor, sent for to diagnose the wolf-complex madness that has overwhelmed Ferdinand.

## THEMES

**Politics and corruption** The Duchess is a charming and gentle persona who has the misfortune to have been brought up in a court where corruption and malice reign. Her desire is to remarry, but that desire puts her on a collision course with her brothers and with their enforcer, Bossola. Her wish is to marry a simple upright person--like the Antonio she in fact marries, but her brothers--the court in general--want her to marry into wealth, family, and power--which means into a politically useful family. The age old conflict between love and self-interest is here primed to lead to disastrous conflict.

**Love and true love** The Duchess may well be said to bestow true love on Antonio, from whom. after all. She has nothing to gain. Her love speeches to him are among the masterpieces of stage dignity and to them Antonio himself responds with equal, though humbled, dignity. The other side of the social coin can be represented by the vulgar and sensuous elite of Florence, whom Bossola scathingly characterizes in his diatribes against the culture of his time.

**Love and class** Antonio is a courtier in the noble milieu of the court of Amalfi, but he is not of noble birth or wealthy, and thus he is--in the eyes of the Cardinal and Ferdinand-- totally unsuited as a match for the Duchess. The intensity of their determination is at its most vivid in their final warnings to the Duchess, about marrying within her own class,.Little do they realize how far she has already gone beyond their worst fears.

**Violence as resolution** The finale of the play calls us back to the very human recourse of violence. Because she cardinal and Ferdinand have lost control of their strongest political weapon, they have no recourse but to use violence against her whole coterie. In the end, we are reminded of how the Israeli Defence Force [violence](#) defeats itself, in its attempt to wipe out Hamas.

## EVENTS

The present play flows like molten lava from characters initially ensconced in an almost idyllic setting, tucked into the corner of a mediaeval Italian principality, a *piccolo mondo Italiano*; from there we will have to pass to a calamitous conclusion in which most of the characters we care about perish. Is there a lesson for us here? Can we catch our breath, wipe away the bloodshed, and proceed to look back on the action?

The lesson we derive will depend on the character in whom we invest our feelings. . If it is the Duchess, and we override our feelings, that she is excessively naïve when it comes to her romantic innocence, we have virtually no alternative figure to steer with. (Only the most attuned text reader would have been ready to double listen to the double edged words of Bossola, who for a long time appears solidary with the classy thugs of the Amalfian polity.) We must subscribe fully to the duchess' nobility, before we realize what a plurality of beloved seconding voices lie out beyond her in the play. She has a devoted and honorable husband, Antonio although she cannot reveal their marriage. And she has her faithful palace retinue.

What goes wrong, to detach this rightful and delightful and honorable woman from the path of order? The explanation must lie in some inherent wretchedness of the company with which she is surrounded. We know nothing about her former husband, but easily surmise that his rank and pocketbook have rendered him of great value to the Amalfi court. The hierarchy of court leaders were to find Antonio--when finally they knew his social identity,- -intolerably out of place. This realization leads to one of the most dramatically choreographed scenes of the play, in which Ferdinand and the Cardinal remonstrate with the Duchess, stressing and overstressing the importance of an honorable marriage, and of the disastrous implications of failing to uphold the family dynastic standards. Aware as we are, of the Duchess' independence and lofty personal standards, we realize a momentous family clash is on the horizon.