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John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi

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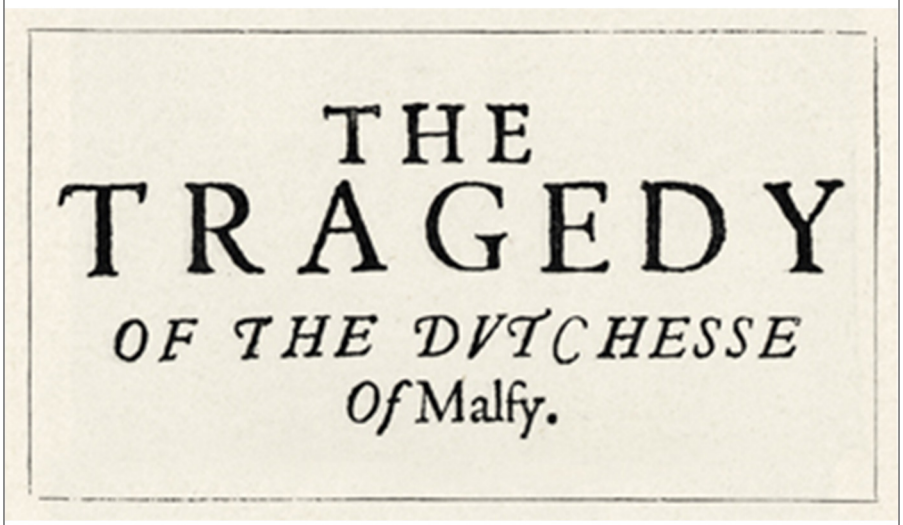
THE
TRAGEDY
OF THE DVTCHESSE
Of Malfy.

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Introduction

This course, on the first two acts of John Webster's Renaissance tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, focuses on the representation of the theme of love and marriage in the Malfi court, and the social conflicts to which it gives rise. The course guides you through the first part of the play and will help you to develop your skills of textual analysis.

This course focuses mainly on Acts 1 and 2 of the play. You should make sure that you have read these two acts of the play before you read the course.

The edition of the play that is used in this course is the Pearson Longman (2009) edition, edited by Monica Kendall. However, there are free versions available online that you may prefer to use.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A230 : *Reading and studying literature*. It can also be found in the publication Anita Pacheco and David Johnson (eds) (2012) *The Renaissance and Long Eighteenth Century*, published by The Open University and Bloomsbury Academic.

Learning Outcomes

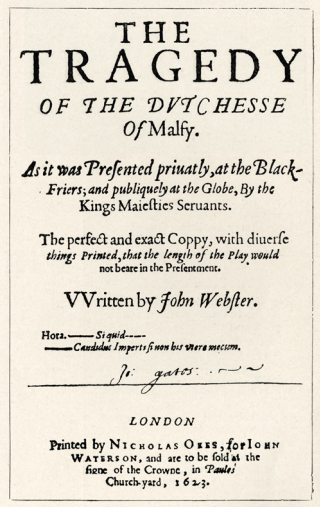
After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the treatment of the themes of love and death in Acts 1 and 2 of John Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi*
- examine other related themes and concerns of Acts 1 and 2
- carry out textual analysis
- recognise some of the historical contexts of the play.

Background

John Webster (*c*.1580–*c*.1634) was Shakespeare's contemporary, though sixteen years younger. He makes a brief appearance in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love* as a boy who tortures mice, spies on Shakespeare's love-making, and feels inspired to take up the pen himself after seeing Shakespeare's blood-soaked revenge tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. 'Plenty of blood. That's the only writing', he asserts. This affectionate but crude caricature testifies to Webster's reputation for writing dark and violent plays. Yet it also testifies to the enduring popularity of those plays. Shakespeare had many gifted colleagues in the play-writing business, but only two – Webster and Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) – are graced with roles in this enormously popular mainstream movie about the late sixteenth-century theatre scene. This course will look at Webster's most well-known play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and consider some possible reasons for the play's continued prominence in the twenty-first-century theatre repertoire.

The Duchess of Malfi does indeed have 'plenty of blood', but this is nothing unusual in Renaissance tragedies. Webster's play is a tragedy about a forbidden love, more specifically a forbidden marriage, which leads ultimately to the deaths of the lovers and many others. Webster's focus in his tragedy of love is class, or rank, to use a more authentically early modern term. Historians of the period often prefer the term 'rank' on the grounds that it better captures relationships in a highly stratified society where the vertical ties of patronage and deference were strong and class consciousness poorly developed in social groups below the level of the ruling elite. Both terms will be used in this course. At the centre of *The Duchess of Malfi* stands a heroine rather than a hero, which is fairly unusual in Renaissance tragedy. The play also contains an extremely enigmatic and sinister villain. This course will examine how Webster represents his heroine's marriage for love, which goes against the wishes of her aristocratic family with disastrous consequences.



THE
TRAGEDY
OF THE DVTCHESSE
Of Malfy.

As it was Presented priuatly, at the Black-Friers; and publiquely at the Globe, By the Kings Maiesties Seruants.

The perfect and exact Coppy, with diuerse things Printed, that the length of the Play would not beare in the Presentment.

VVritten by *John Webſter*.

Hora. —— *Si quid* ——
—— *Cauidus Impertis ſi non his vtere mecum.*

LONDON

Printed by NICHOLAS OKES, for IOHN WATERSON, and are to be ſold at the ſigne of the Crowne, in *Paules* Church-yard, 1623.

Figure 1 Title page of the 1623 quarto version of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Photo: Lebrecht Authors.

The Duchess of Malfi was first performed in 1613 or 1614 by the King's Men, the acting company to which Shakespeare belonged. The play was not printed until around ten

years later in 1623, in quarto, a smaller and less expensive edition than the larger folio size used for the first edition of Shakespeare's complete works. The title page of this edition (shown in Figure 1) tells us that the play 'was presented privatly, at the Blackfriers and publicly at the Globe'; that is, the play opened at the Blackfriars, the company's indoor theatre, and then played at the open-air Globe. The title page also informs potential readers that the text of the play is the 'perfect and exact Coppy, with diverse things Printed, that the length of the Play would not beare in the Presentment'; in other words, the play text includes numerous passages that were cut for performance. The publisher, then, appears to be trying to tempt buyers with the prospect of a longer, fuller version of the play than had ever been seen in the theatre. This is testament to Webster's fame and reputation as a dramatic poet, as is the announcement of the author's name in the next line, in larger type. The 1623 quarto is the only substantive text of the play that we have, and modern editions and productions are based on it. We have no way of knowing what *The Duchess of Malfi* looked like in its first performances, beyond assuming that it was shorter than the text that has descended to us. What is interesting is that the title page of the 1623 quarto draws such a clear distinction between the play in performance and the play as a text to be read and savoured in the study.

Act 1: setting the scene

The representation of love in *The Duchess of Malfi* begins in earnest with the Duchess's courtship of and marriage to her steward Antonio. This is also a major dramatic climax, the event which drives the action of the rest of the play. Yet it does not take place until the end of Act 1. Indeed, the Duchess's wooing of Antonio does not even begin until we are 365 lines into the play. Why do we have to wait such a long time for this crucial episode? What is achieved by structuring the scene in this way? Clearly, by the time the marriage unfolds onstage, we are in possession of a good deal of information about the dramatic world in which it is taking place. Webster, it seems, is providing us with a dramatic context against which to respond to his representation of love and marriage. In the first section of this course, I will consider how Webster sets the scene for the Duchess's forbidden marriage, before going on to examine his depiction of this important moment in the play.

Courts ideal and real

The play opens with an exchange between Antonio and his friend Delio. Antonio has been away in France and Delio asks him what he thought of the court of the French king.

Activity 1

How does Antonio reply to his friend's question? Reread his speech (1.1.4–22) and then try to summarise it in no more than five sentences.

Discussion

Here is my response:

1. Antonio admires the French court for its lack of corruption, the 'judicious' or wise king having banished all flatterers and people of bad character or reputation.
2. The king considers this cleansing of his court to be divinely inspired; God's work rather than his own.
3. This is because of the enormous influence the royal court has on the entire country – the court that is healthy has a benign influence, while the corrupt one infects 'the whole land'.
4. Antonio then asks what the source is of this 'blessed government' that he found in France and answers that it is the king's wise and truthful counsellors who, rather than flattering the king, give him candid and truthful advice about the state of the nation.

Antonio, then, opens the play with a statement of how important the royal court is to the well-being of the nation as a whole. That is what he says, but we need to think as well about the way he says it. What is distinctive about the language of Antonio's description of the French court? Perhaps the most striking part of the speech is the long analogy he makes between royal courts generally and 'a common fountain'. The appearance of the word 'like' in line 12 tells us that this analogy is a simile, a comparison of two apparently dissimilar things that uses either 'like' or 'as' to enforce the comparison. Antonio's simile is an extended one, as he goes on to develop it in the course of the next four lines: the

'common fountain' from which everyone drinks should be pure, but if it is poisoned (i.e. corrupt), it spreads its contagion throughout the land.

In the main, the passage is typical blank verse, which means unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. That is, the lines of verse in general do not rhyme and have ten syllables each, five stressed (in bold) and five unstressed, arranged in the following pattern: de **dum**, de **dum**, de **dum**, de **dum**, de **dum**. One of the effects of employing this fairly regular metre is that deviations from it tend to stand out. Look, for example, at the following passage:

> but if't chance
> Some cursed example poison't near the head,
> Death and diseases through the whole land spread.
>
> (1.1.13–15)

Line 14 is metrically quite even, but line 15 is a bit different: it would be hard to read it without placing a fairly strong stress on the first word, 'death'. After that, the metre returns to iambic, but the brief deviation serves to draw the spectator's attention to the word 'death'. In this way, Webster underlines the dire consequences of a degenerate court. The point is highlighted further by the sudden appearance of a rhyme between 'head' and 'spread' in lines 14 and 15, which makes the lines stand out even more.

There is a stark contrast in the speech between the image of 'pure silver drops' and the language of poison, disease and death, as there is between pejorative terms like 'flatt'ring sycophants' (l. 6) and Antonio's religious register: 'the work of heaven' (l. 10), 'blessed government' (l. 16). In literary studies, a register is a particular type or style of language; you can refer to a character employing a formal or informal register, for example, or to his or her use of vocabulary associated with a particular profession or sphere of activity. The fact that Antonio speaks about a royal court in a religious register reminds us that in early modern England doctrines like the divine right of kings, which claimed that kings were God's representatives on earth, invested the monarchy with a religious significance.

So what happens next? First, Bosola enters, followed by the Cardinal. Their conversation at the very least makes us suspect that what Antonio observed in France is conspicuously lacking in Italy, in particular when Bosola reminds the Cardinal that he 'fell into the galleys in your service' (1.1.34). A few lines later, any doubts we might have had about Bosola's meaning vanish, as Delio informs Antonio: 'I knew this fellow seven years in the galleys / For a notorious murder, and 'twas thought / The Cardinal suborned it' (1.1.72–4). We quickly grasp that in this drama, the powerful, far from surrounding themselves with wise and candid counsellors, hire men to commit crimes on their behalf. Moving from text to performance, in the theatre this point would be reinforced visually by the Cardinal's religious costume, which tells us that even churchmen use their power for criminal ends. The enormous gap separating the French ideal from the Italian reality is driven home a bit later in the scene, when Ferdinand, the Cardinal's brother and Duke of Calabria, reproaches two of his assembled courtiers for laughing:

> Why do you laugh? 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.
>
> (1.1.127–30)

We could hardly have a clearer indication of how far the Italian courts fall short of the 'fixed order' described by Antonio: in place of a rational prince advised and guided by honest advisors, we have a prince who surrounds himself with courtiers whose sole purpose is to flatter his ego with their obsequious behaviour.

So Webster begins his play with a description of an ideal court only then to show onstage a court that fails in every respect to live up to that ideal. This is a crucial part of his construction of the play's dramatic world, but most critics have assumed that this portrayal of courtly decadence and corruption in the play text also gains from being viewed in the context of the court of King James I, who had been on the English throne for around ten years when *The Duchess of Malfi* was first performed. James would wholeheartedly have endorsed the sentiments expressed in Antonio's opening speech; indeed, he had himself produced a comparable description of the ideal royal court in his book on kingship, *Basilikon Doron* (Greek for *Royal Gift*) (1599). The book is addressed to his eldest son and heir Prince Henry, and advises him to take great care in choosing his chief courtiers:

> see that they bee of a good fame and without blemish: otherwise, what can the people thinke? but that yee have chosen a companie unto you according to your owne humour, and so have preferred these men for the love of their vices and crimes that ye know them to be guyltie of … And nexte, see that they be indued with such honest qualities, as are meete for such offices as yee ordayne them to serve in, that your judgement may be knowne in imploying every man according to his gifts … Make your Court and companie to bee a paterne of godlinesse and all honeste vertues to all the reste of the people.
>
> (James I, 1599, pp. 76–7, 83)

Yet in reality, James's court was infamous for its profligacy and corruption. He himself showered his favourites with money, offices and privileges, and those same favourites spared no expense in displaying their prestige to the world through their own lavish spending. James's extravagance contributed to a constant need for money that he satisfied in part by selling titles of honour like knighthoods and peerages. Traditionally thought of as indicators of distinguished ancestry or rewards for loyal service, such titles in James's court were up for grabs by anyone with sufficient money to pay for them. It is not hard to see how a court dominated by the king's powerful favourites which funded its taste for extravagance through the unabashed sale of honours worked to point out the discrepancy between James's theory of kingship and the actual practice. This was no doubt reinforced by the Jacobean court's reputation for graft – James's treasurers were notoriously corrupt – and for the sexual licentiousness that will be embodied in Webster's play by Julia and the Cardinal. Later in the opening scene of *The Duchess*, when Ferdinand secures Bosola the post of the Duchess's Provisorship of Horse on condition that he spies on his employer, the play enacts another feature of James's court: its status as a hotbed of plotting and intrigue.

Figure 2 Attributed to William Larkin, *George Villiers*, *c*.1616, oil on canvas, 206 × 119 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London. Photo: © National Portrait Gallery. George Villiers, the First Duke of Buckingham, was one of James I's powerful favourites.

Bosola the malcontent

In placing the action of his play within a corrupt courtly setting, Webster is also adhering to one of the main conventions of the dramatic genre to which *The Duchess of Malfi* is usually thought to belong: revenge tragedy, an enormously popular genre in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. From Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (*c*.1587), one of the earliest and most influential of this group of plays, through Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), the most famous of all revenge tragedies, to a later example of the genre like Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), revenge tragedies consistently present their audience with the spectacle of decadent courts and irresponsible, often criminal, rulers. The deficiencies of the status quo create a logical space for a particular character type: the malcontent, a character who is consumed with disgust at the corruption and stupidity of courtly society and who vents his spleen by railing against it. Hamlet plays this role in Shakespeare's revenge tragedy, and in *The Duchess of Malfi* it is filled by Bosola. When Antonio refers to Bosola as the 'only court-gall' (1.1.23), he is using a metaphor, which, like a simile, makes a comparison between two things – in this case between Bosola and a 'gall', or a sore produced by rubbing – but without the presence of 'like' or 'as'. Metaphors, then, establish a much closer relationship between the two items being associated than similes do. Antonio is alluding to Bosola's fondness for railing at the court, harassing and tormenting it with his verbal abuse. ('Gall' also means 'bile', the bitter substance secreted by the liver; a secondary sense which intensifies the force of Antonio's metaphor.)

Activity 2

A few lines later, when the Cardinal has left the stage, Bosola complains to Antonio and Delio about the Cardinal and his brother Ferdinand. Look at his speech at lines 50–64. What point is he making about the Duchess's brothers, and how do his similes and metaphors help to drive his meaning home?

Discussion

Bosola attacks the Cardinal and Ferdinand for presiding over a courtly environment where loyal service reaps no reward, where only 'flatt'ring panders' prosper (1.1.54). His language is extraordinarily colourful and energetic, due in large part to the similes and metaphors he uses. He begins by likening the brothers to 'plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools' (1.1.50–1) and then goes on to explain the simile: however 'rich' and 'o'erladen with fruit' they are, the fact that they stand over stagnant water means that only 'crows, pies and caterpillars feed on them' (1.1.52–3). The 'standing pool' presents an obvious contrast to Antonio's clear and flowing courtly fountain, while the 'crows, pies and caterpillars' are metaphors for the kind of courtly parasites that flourish under the Cardinal and Ferdinand. By identifying them with scavengers and insects, Bosola manages to convey both their contemptibility and their voracious appetite for the rewards that come with princely favour. This type of imagery continues in his next simile: 'Could I be one of their flatt'ring panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off' (1.1.53–5). Bosola's similes and metaphors vividly capture the brothers' enormous power and wealth, along with the greedy ambition of courtly suppliants. His speech is in prose not verse, but that in no way diminishes its linguistic richness. Any actor playing the part of Bosola would need to let the character's linguistic energy and bitterness guide his delivery of the lines.

Like Antonio, Bosola is low-born, and therefore entirely dependent for material success on the patronage of his social betters. His role thus contributes significantly to an important aspect of the play: its examination of class relations in a highly stratified society. Bosola's wit and satirical edge are throughout the play levelled at a patronage system that rewards toadying rather than merit. Yet the play makes clear the invidious position he is in. Indeed, Antonio has already given us his opinion of Bosola:

> yet I observe his railing
> Is not for simple love of piety,
> Indeed he rails at those things which he wants,
> Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud,
> Bloody, or envious, as any man,
> If he had means to be so.
>
> (1.1.23–8)

Bosola is torn between an acute awareness of the social and moral deficiencies of the patronage system and a longing for social advancement that binds him to it. His vision of himself as a horse-leech, greedily sucking the brothers' blood until he drops off, captures something of this doubleness: he may despise the yes-men who thrive in the courtly milieu, but at the same time he wants to share in the material prosperity they enjoy. Bosola has in common with Iago from William Shakespeare's *Othello* his status as a disgruntled servant, though Webster invests his version of this character type with a level of moral awareness absent from Shakespeare's viciously resentful ensign.

Marriage for love: family opposition

Having alerted us to the autocratic and criminal propensities of the Cardinal and Ferdinand, Webster goes on to inform us in the opening scene of their opposition to the idea of their widowed sister's remarrying.

Activity 3

Have another look at lines 298–344. Try to identify two reasons for the Cardinal's and Ferdinand's hostility to the prospect of their sister's marrying a second time.

Discussion

Here's what I've come up with:

1. Both brothers seem to be worried that their widowed sister will succumb to temptation and undertake a marriage that damages the family honour.
2. They also appear to be afraid that because she is a widow she is more likely to want to marry a second time.

This is another aspect of the play that is worthwhile examining in its historical and cultural context. The brothers' attitudes tell us a great deal about early modern ideas about women and family honour. Their fears are in large part fuelled by anxieties about female sexuality in general and of widows in particular. Women in early modern England were widely thought to have a much stronger sexual appetite than men, which is one of the main reasons they were often feared as untrustworthy and why chastity was so insistently invoked as the cardinal feminine virtue. This is the anxiety voiced so poignantly by Othello when he exclaims: 'O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites' (Shakespeare, 2008 [1622], 3.3.271–3). Ferdinand expresses this misogynistic commonplace when he says to the Duchess: 'And women like that part which, like the lamprey, / Hath ne'er a bone in't (1.1.340–1), his reference to the lamprey, a type of eel, containing a bawdy suggestion of 'penis'. Widows, as sexually experienced women, were thought to be especially susceptible to this feminine vice. As the writer Joseph Swetnam put it in his work *The Arraignment of Lewd, Froward and Unconstant Women* (1615), 'it is more easy for a young man or maid to forbear carnal acts than it is for a widow' (quoted in Henderson and MacManus, 1985, p. 239). So we find the Cardinal telling his sister that widows' vows never to remarry commonly last 'no longer / Than the turning of an hourglass' (1.1.309–10), while Ferdinand harps on about this theme with particular urgency, declaring that to marry twice is 'luxurious' (lascivious) (1.1.303), that those who do so have 'spotted' livers (1.1.304) – the liver was seen as the seat of passion – and calling his sister 'lusty widow' before leaving the stage (1.1.344).

The fact that widows were not firmly under the control of their male relations intensified their ability to arouse masculine anxieties. In this period, when a woman married she moved from a position of legal subservience to her father to being legally subject to her husband. A widow, then, especially if she inherited wealth from her dead husband, could claim an alarming degree of independence. She might, as a result, presume to choose her second husband herself, rather than marrying in accordance with her family's wishes. This is a prospect that clearly worries the Cardinal, who warns his sister not to 'take your own choice' (1.1.322). The Duchess's position as a female ruler only exacerbates her brothers' concerns about her capacity to act independently of their wishes. Their repeated

references to the dangerous temptations of the courtly life – 'You live in a rank pasture here, i'th'court' (1.1.312) and 'I would have you to give o'er these chargeable revels' (1.1.337) – disclose their unease with the power she wields as a duchess who presides over her own court.

Both brothers are concerned about family honour, but what precisely would make a second marriage dishonourable? Neither Ferdinand nor the Cardinal says outright that what they fear is that their sister will marry 'beneath her', but this uneasiness about rank is strongly implied in the advice they give her:

FERDINAND You are a widow:
You know already what man is, and therefore
Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence –

CARDINAL No, nor any thing without the addition, honour,
Sway your high blood.

(1.1.299–303)

The Cardinal's reference to the Duchess's 'high blood' in particular smacks of class insecurity: he is afraid that she will fall into the arms of a lower-class man. Later in the play, when the brothers learn that their sister has indeed remarried, they leap to the conclusion that her second husband is of humble birth. So the Cardinal cries 'Shall our blood, / The royal blood of Aragon and Castile, / Be thus attainted?' (2.5.21–3), confirming his belief that a cross-class marriage constitutes a tainting or corruption of the family's pure noble blood. The fact that at this stage they do not even know the identity of their sister's new husband demonstrates just how insecure and under threat they feel, as though the privileges and power they inherited by virtue of their exalted birth are now being put under pressure by interlopers from lower down the social scale.

The brothers' jitteriness about rank reflects the unprecedented levels of social mobility that characterised early modern England. Those in power were fond of claiming that a fixed and rigid social hierarchy was divinely ordained, but the reality was restless movement up and down the social scale, as land and wealth flowed away from old, established families into the hands of 'new' men – lawyers, merchants, administrators, yeomen – who were eager to step into their predecessors' shoes. Not surprisingly, this erosion of the social hierarchy was accompanied by a heated debate about whether noble blood or personal merit was more deserving of honour. Webster, the son of a wealthy coach-maker, contributed to this debate throughout his theatrical career. According to literary critic Elli Abraham Shellist (2004), it is 'the source of cultural conflict that is most frequently and intensely enacted' in his plays. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster signals that the play's dominant aristocratic order is in a state of crisis, threatened by men like Antonio, an able administrator who, as we will soon learn, captures the heart of a high-born woman more impressed by merit than rank.

So the brothers' attitude to the Duchess's marrying again is determined not just by their ideas about women but also by their ideas about class boundaries and the nature of marriage. They share misogynistic views of the sexuality of widows and the patriarchal assumption that they have the right to dictate their sister's sexual destiny. But these attitudes are all bound up with their belief that marriage is a union between a man and a woman which should be chosen not by the individual but by the family, and not for reasons of love but with a view to enhancing family power and maintaining elite exclusivity. By the time Webster wrote *The Duchess*, this conception of marriage was very much associated with the upper classes. It is important to recognise that there was an alternative view available, often called the companionate ideal of marriage, which (as its name suggests)

placed love and compatibility above the demands of family honour. This very different notion of marriage derived from the Protestant belief that marriage was an essential ingredient of human happiness and, as such, had to be built on a foundation of mutual love and respect. As an early seventeenth-century commentator put it: 'As for love, it is the life and soul of marriage, without which it is no more itself than a carcass is a man; yea, it is uncomfortable, miserable and a living death' (William Whately (1617) quoted in Keeble, 1994, p. 150). While the aristocracy clung to its desire for dynastic unions, other sections of early modern English society adhered to an idea of marriage as a partnership based on reciprocal affection.

Love and marriage: Antonio the steward

The brothers, of course, turn out to be right about their sister, who is indeed planning a second marriage to a commoner. Like Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*, she chooses for herself rather than deferring to the wishes of her male relations. How does the play encourage us to feel about the Duchess's defiant second marriage? It is important that by the time her intentions towards Antonio are made clear, we have become well acquainted with the object of her affections. We have already seen that Antonio and Delio begin the scene alone onstage, when Antonio is depicted in terms of his well-developed and credible political ideas. As the other main characters enter and exit, the two characters stand apart and discuss them, Antonio providing detailed descriptions of Bosola, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, and finally of the Duchess. The fact that it is he who is selected to provide the audience with this information endows this character of humble birth with a considerable amount of authority. It has often been remarked that in this opening scene Antonio and Delio serve as a kind of Chorus, guiding the spectators' responses in the manner of the Choruses of the tragedies of ancient Greece.

As the Duchess's steward, Antonio occupies the same position as Malvolio in Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* (1601). It is a measure of the difference between the two plays that while Malvolio is ridiculed and humiliated as a social-climbing kill-joy, Antonio is treated with considerable respect. Not only is he allowed to enlighten the spectators as to the natures of the play's main characters; his merit is emphasised when he is announced as the winner of the joust (1.1.90–3). Malvolio is tricked into revealing his deep-seated longing for the social advancement that marriage to his employer, the Countess Olivia, would bring. Antonio, by contrast, discovers in this scene that he really is the object of his employer's desire. By investing the figure of the steward with so much authority, Webster is presenting a direct challenge to the elitism and caste pride represented by the Duchess's brothers.

Antonio's descriptions of the Cardinal and Ferdinand serve to enhance our understanding of the kind of social and political rottenness the brothers embody. What he stresses is the gap between their inner and outer selves. According to Antonio, while the Cardinal may play the role of 'brave fellow' when in company (1.1.159), underneath he is 'a melancholy churchman' (1.1.164) given to inveterate plotting against his enemies and not averse to bribing his way to the top of his profession. Ferdinand, in a similar fashion, acts the part of suave Renaissance prince, but beneath the surface lies a 'most perverse and turbulent nature' (1.1.176). In his role as judge, he pretends 'to sleep o'th'bench / Only to entrap offenders in their answers' (1.1.182–3). Through Antonio, then, the play identifies both brothers with a talent for dissimulation; they are actors who use performance to control and dominate others.

Activity 4

Look now at lines 195–217 of Act 1, Scene 1 and try to answer these two questions:

1. What does Antonio say about his employer, the Duchess?
2. What strikes you as distinctive about his language?

Discussion

1. Antonio describes the Duchess as a paragon of womanhood, as different from her corrupt brothers as it is possible to be. Her speech, he says, is enchanting without being in any way sinister, and her countenance is so lovely that it could cure paralysis! Antonio stresses the Duchess's virtue as well, specifically her chastity: she may attract men through her beauty and eloquence, but these are coupled with a 'divine' 'continence' that 'cuts off' lustful thoughts and that endows even her dreams with a purity that other women, including those who have just been to confession, fail to match. Like the Duchess's brothers, Antonio sees chastity as the quintessential feminine virtue, but while the Cardinal and Ferdinand take for granted their sister's moral frailty, Antonio pays her the compliment of claiming she entirely lives up to the ideal. He concludes that the Duchess ought to be a model for other women to emulate.
2. This summary makes it clear how exaggerated, how hyperbolic, Antonio's praise of the Duchess is. When he says that her speech and sweet look combined could enable a man crippled with paralysis to dance a galliard, a dance that required considerable speed and strength, he does not mean his words to be taken literally; he is using hyperbole, or extravagant overstatement, to convey the power of the Duchess's charms.

Webster is drawing here on a particular kind of love poetry of the period, often termed Petrarchan, from its originator, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374). Petrarchan love poetry usually took the form of the sonnet – a 14-line poem in iambic pentameter with a complex rhyme scheme – and had numerous conventions, one of which was a strong tendency to idealise the loved object. Look at this fairly typical example by Edmund Spenser (*c.*1552–1599), which is sonnet 3 from his sonnet sequence *Amoretti*:

The soverayne beauty which I doo admyre,
  witnesse the world how worthy to be prayzed;
  the light wherof hath kindled heavenly fyre
  in my fraile spirit by her from baseness raysed:
That being now with her huge brightnesse dazed,
  base thing I can no more endure to view,
  but looking still on her I stand amazed
  at wondrous sight of so celestiall hew.
So when my toung would speak her praises dew,
  it stopped is with thought's astonishment;
  and when my pen would write her titles true,
  it ravisht is with fancie's wonderment:

> Yet in my hart I then both speake and write
> the wonder that my wit cannot endite [put into words].
>
> (Evans, 1977, p. 115)

Like Antonio's speech, Spenser's poem is concerned with the power of female beauty, which is associated with monarchy in the word 'soverayne' (sovereign) (l. 1) and with divinity in words like 'heavenly' (l. 3) and 'celestiall' (l. 8). Antonio too invests the Duchess's appearance with a spiritual potency, and both the sonnet and the speech see this as capable of strengthening and ennobling the onlooker: like Antonio's man lying in 'a dead palsy', the speaker of Spenser's poem is raised from baseness by the woman's beauty, his 'fraile' spirit revived and renewed.

By the time of the first performance of *The Duchess* in 1613–14, this kind of love poetry, with its idealised picture of the woman, was fairly old-fashioned, and this is reflected in Delio's amused response to his friend's rapturous speech: 'Fie, Antonio, / You play the wire-drawer with her commendations' (1.1.213–14). By identifying Antonio with a man who stretches metal to make wire, Delio's metaphor suggests that his praise of the Duchess was both long-winded and a trifle excessive. But Antonio sticks to his guns, closing his description of the Duchess with a memorable couplet: 'All her particular worth grows to this sum, / She stains the time past, lights the time to come' (1.1.216–17). In other words, she leaves an indelible mark on the past (or possibly makes it look dark by comparison with herself) and casts a light upon the future. Thus, by the time the Duchess begins her courtship of Antonio, we know that he is in love with her, and Webster's representation of that love in Petrarchan terms identifies it as intensely romantic, as a form of adoration that, in Antonio's circumstances, defines the social distance separating him from his aristocratic employer.

Love and marriage: the Duchess

What of the Duchess herself? According to Clifford Leech and James L. Calderwood, in studies of the play produced in the 1950s and 1960s, she is portrayed in accordance with the stereotypes of the highly sexed widow voiced by her brothers, and her marriage to Antonio is depicted as wilful, wanton and irresponsible (Rabkin, 1968, pp. 75–9, 93). Do you agree? We will address this question by looking at Webster's representation of the Duchess's courtship of her steward, but before we do that, it is worth remembering that by the time we meet the play's protagonist, her brothers have been revealed unambiguously as villains. It seems unlikely, then, that the play would invite us to endorse their views. A more credible argument would be that the play is seeking to discredit misogynistic attitudes to women by putting them in the mouths of its least appealing characters.

The Duchess is certainly violating norms of femininity in the final episode of Act 1, as she adopts the active role in the marriage, courting and effectively proposing marriage to Antonio. She is thus even bolder than Desdemona, who only 'hints' to Othello that she would welcome his courtship (Shakespeare, 2008 [1622], 1.3.166). Yet, I would argue that the Duchess's seizing of the initiative is not presented as the result of an overactive libido. Indeed, the Duchess speaks of her own sexuality with admirable common sense, saying to Antonio: 'This is flesh and blood, sir, / 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb' (1.1.457–9). This is refreshing, not only after the brothers' misogyny, but also after Antonio's own desexualised portrait of the Duchess. Later in the play, in a moment of great danger, she asks Ferdinand: 'Why should only I / Of all the other princes

of the world / Be cased up like a holy relic? I have youth, / And a little beauty' (3.2.137–9). Both these passages stress the difference between nature and artifice, between the naturalness of a woman's flesh, blood, youth and beauty and the way patriarchal society seeks to transform women into decorative, precious objects that can be locked away and safely controlled. This contrast between nature and representation suggests that the Duchess is neither lascivious, as her brothers would have it, nor the inhuman paragon of loyalty and chastity – the alabaster figure, the holy relic – that men would like her, and women generally, to be. She expresses her own sexuality in a manner that makes it sound healthy and natural, in opposition to a patriarchal mindset predisposed to see women in terms of the binary oppositions of angel and whore.

Figure 3 Helen Mirren as the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi*, dir. Adrian Noble (Manchester Royal Exchange, 1980). Photo: Photostage.

Webster, then, appears to have no qualms about stressing the sexual dimension of the Duchess's love for Antonio. What else can we say about his portrayal of the lovers' relationship in the final courtship section of the play's long opening scene? The expression of love and desire is necessarily muted at the start, as the Duchess keeps up the pretence that she has sent for Antonio to help her in the preparation of her will. There are moments when her nerves seem to get the better of her, as when she forgets what she just asked Antonio to do and needs to be reminded (1.1.365–8). But their mutual attraction is evident throughout, and in the theatre a director would need to decide just how openly flirtatious or guarded their initial interaction should be. The Duchess takes more pleasure in Antonio's compliment – 'So please your beauteous excellence' (1.1.372) – than seems strictly compatible with her position as his employer. And both parties waste no time in bringing the discussion around to the topic of marriage, Antonio revealing, when pressed, a touching desire for parenthood:

> Say a man never marry, nor have children,
> What takes that from him? Only the bare name
> Of being a father, or the weak delight
> To see the little wanton ride a-cock-horse
> Upon a painted stick, or hear him chatter
> Like a taught starling.
>
> (1.1.402–7)

Slowly, the Duchess builds up to a more open expression of her feelings, declaring her love – 'Go, go brag / You have left me heartless, mine is in your bosom' (1.1.452–3) – and revealing that it is rooted in her perception and appreciation of Antonio's virtues:

> If you will know where breathes a complete man –
> I speak it without flattery – turn your eyes
> And progress through yourself.
>
> (1.1.439–41)

The marriage itself is represented in terms of harmony and mutuality. Both characters kneel and speak lines that evoke strongly companionate ideas of marriage: the 'sacred Gordian' knot that cannot be untied (1.1.482); the music of the 'spheres' (1.1.483); the 'loving palms' that 'ne'er bore fruit divided' (1.1.485, 487). The delivery of the lines, the fact that they are performed as a kind of duet with the Duchess and Antonio echoing and completing one another's images, reinforces the couple's mutual affection.

Figure 4 Emblem of loving palms as a symbol of a good marriage, in Cats, J. (1657) *Emblemata Moralia et Oeconomica*, in *Alle de Werken van Jakob Cats*, Amsterdam. Photo: By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C..

It seems highly likely that Webster's original Protestant audience would have responded favourably to this depiction of a marriage based on shared admiration and the desire to raise a family. Would it have been a problem that the marriage was clandestine? Early modern marriage law is too complex a topic to deal with in any depth here; suffice it to say that a valid and binding marriage required only that the couple declare their mutual consent in the present tense – what the Duchess refers to as 'a contract in a chamber, / *Per verba de presenti*' (1.1.480–1). But in 1604, James I sought 'to clarify the definition of marriage by taking it out of private hands and requiring it to be validated by ecclesiastical ceremony' (Marcus, 2009, p. 36), a move opposed by large segments of English society who saw this as an encroachment by church and state on a time-honoured tradition. When the Duchess declares 'We now are man and wife, and 'tis the Church / That must but echo this' (1.1.492–3), she is giving priority to an idea of marriage as a private contract outside the direct control of the ecclesiastical authorities – an idea with which many of the play's original spectators would no doubt have sympathised.

To portray the relationship between the Duchess and Antonio as devoid of affection, as some productions do, is to ignore the copious textual evidence that Webster depicts it as a love match. It is certainly true, however, that Webster never lets us forget the power differential between the bride and groom. The staging of the courtship stresses how much this marriage turns conventional gender roles on their heads. Not only does the Duchess instigate the wooing; it is she who places the ring on Antonio's finger, and when he kneels in response, she raises him up again. Visually, this underscores her powerful position.

Webster's use of dramatic irony strengthens our sense of this; not to be confused with verbal irony, when a text means something quite different from what it says, dramatic irony involves a situation in which an audience or reader knows more than one or more characters. The fact that we know what the Duchess is up to, while Antonio remains in the dark until the Duchess slips the ring onto his finger, intensifies our awareness of his inferior position.

Webster also makes it clear that for Antonio part of the attraction of the Duchess's proposal is the self-advancement it promises, hence his initial response when she gives him her wedding ring and her amorous intentions become clear: 'There is a saucy and ambitious devil / Is dancing in this circle' (1.1.416–17). The metaphor of the wedding ring as a magic circle inside of which a 'saucy and ambitious devil' is dancing conveys not only Antonio's desire for upward social mobility, but also his conviction that that desire is a dangerous temptation. Webster is hardly cynical about this: we have already heard Antonio's fulsome speech of praise for the Duchess, as well as his deeply felt evocation of the joys of fatherhood. The point is not that Antonio feels no love for the Duchess, but that his motives for marrying are mixed.

He is also frightened of the Duchess's brothers, and Webster encourages us to share his fear. We have just heard both Ferdinand and the Cardinal make thinly veiled threats to their sister, the language of which suggests that a secret, unauthorised second marriage will be met with severe punishment. So Ferdinand declares: 'Such weddings may more properly be said / To be executed than celebrated' (1.1.327–8); the Cardinal adding: 'The marriage night / Is the entrance into some prison' (1.1.328–9). These statements serve as prolepses gesturing towards the violent treatment awaiting the Duchess and setting up strong verbal links between marriage for love on the one hand and suffering and death on the other. Webster continues to provide verbal clues as to the fate of this forbidden union during the courtship and marriage. We have seen that the Duchess is forced to dissemble her intentions at the start of the wooing, but her pretence that she is making her will seems a desperately ominous start to the courtship, and the language at this point, with its talk of the 'deep groans and terrible ghastly looks' of the dying, and the 'winding sheet' in which a corpse was wrapped (1.1.383, 393), underlines just how ill-fated this marriage for love will prove. Webster's language subtly yokes love and death, alerting the spectators to the dangers awaiting the lovers, even if the heroine herself chooses to dismiss them.

Activity 5

Read the Duchess's speech that follows Ferdinand's exit at line 345 and precedes Cariola's entry at 353. How would you characterise the mood of this passage?

Discussion

I would say that the mood of the speech is extraordinarily defiant. We have just heard Ferdinand and the Cardinal threaten to punish a second marriage, but as soon as the Duchess is alone onstage, she dismisses them with withering contempt:

> If all my royal kindred
> Lay in my way unto this marriage
> I'd make them my low foot-steps ...
>
> (1.1.345–7)

The lines imagine her royal kindred as a literal obstacle blocking her path to 'this marriage', an obstacle she simply turns to her advantage, using them as 'low foot-steps' to the altar. The Duchess's sentence carries on for another six lines, most of

which are taken up with an extended simile in which she makes an analogy between herself and 'men in some great battles' who '[b]y apprehending danger have achieved / Almost impossible actions' (1.1.348, 349–50). As in the opening lines of the speech, the Duchess acknowledges the problem but determines to use it to her advantage, just as men in battle sometimes do, facing danger and thereby transforming their fear into courage and valour.

The Duchess is entering imaginatively into a masculine world of military heroism that she has only heard about: 'I have heard soldiers say so' (1.1.350). Her sex may exclude her from this world, but her high rank connects her to it, for war had traditionally been the chief vocation of the male aristocrat, as Ferdinand indicates earlier in the scene when he asks impatiently 'When shall we leave this sportive action and fall to action indeed?' (1.1.93–4). We can hear the note of class pride in the Duchess's speech: the easy sense of superiority that fuels the metaphor of her 'royal kindred' as nothing more than 'low foot-steps'; the self-assertiveness of her declaration 'So I, through frights and threat'nings will assay / This dangerous venture' (1.1.351–2). When Antonio, later in the scene, asks 'But for your brothers?' (1.1.472), the Duchess replies:

> Do not think of them.
> All discord, without this circumference,
> Is only to be pitied and not feared.
>
> (1.1.472–4)

This is a pattern that will be repeated throughout Acts 2 and 3 in moments of danger, as the Duchess seeks to reassure her husband, who consistently feels helpless and overwhelmed by the course of events. Antonio seems to recognise the gender confusion when he says to his new wife: 'These words should be mine' (1.1.476).

So the play, while staging a cross-class marriage, never loses sight of the class differences of the couple and the way this skews traditional gender roles. The Duchess may marry the steward she admires as 'a complete man' (1.1.439), but she remains very much an aristocrat. This brings us to the vexed question of why she places Cariola behind the arras prior to wooing Antonio. It seems that Cariola emerges from her hiding place in order to act as witness of the couple's marriage vows, but numerous critics, including Clifford Leech and Frank Whigham, have felt that there is something duplicitous and coercive in the Duchess's treatment of her prospective husband in this episode; the wary steward is enticed with promises of vast wealth (1.1.432–4) and ultimately trapped in wedlock by the Duchess's own spy behind the arras (Leech in Rabkin, 1968, p. 93; Whigham, 1985, p. 173). Does Webster, then, reveal in his heroine traces of the kind of manipulative bullying we see as well in her brothers, suggesting that using people is part and parcel of being a member of the ruling class? Perhaps, but other critics have argued for a reading of this episode that is more flattering to the Duchess. For example, William Empson suggests that she hides Cariola precisely in order to leave Antonio free to decline her proposal, an insult he may have felt disinclined to deliver in the presence of her waiting woman (Rabkin, 1968, p. 93).

This long opening scene draws to a close with Cariola's choric commentary:

> Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman
> Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows
> A fearful madness. I owe her much of pity.
>
> (1.1.504–6)

Cariola is uncertain whether to see the Duchess's bid for self-determination as evidence of her 'greatness' of spirit or her feminine wilfulness. It is important that 'greatness' is offered here as a possibility. Whigham calls the Duchess 'a cultural voyager' who 'arrogates to herself a new role, that of female hero' (1985, p. 172). She does this not only in the speech we considered earlier but also when she says to Cariola. 'Wish me good speed, / For I am going into a wilderness / Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew / To be my guide' (1.1.362–5). She is moving knowingly into uncharted waters, beyond the bounds of socially accepted behaviour where there will be no clear path to guide her. It is in the absence of models to imitate that she identifies herself with the notion of masculine heroism so integral to her class. Cariola, too, is uncertain how to describe an aristocratic woman who is flouting the requirements of her rank and gender.

In Act 1, Webster constructs a dramatic world dominated by a morally impoverished aristocratic elite obsessed with controlling their sister's sexuality and policing the class boundary that sets them apart from those lower down the social scale. It is against the backdrop of this poisonous courtly milieu that the marriage between the Duchess and Antonio takes on such positive meanings, and becomes a vehicle for upholding a view of marriage based on mutual love and compatibility and the right of a woman to determine her own sexual destiny, independently of her male relations. There is nothing glib or sentimental in Webster's endorsement of these values; the play does not pretend that love provides a simple solution to disparities of rank, for example. Yet to a very real extent, Webster draws on the conventions of stage comedy in Act 1 of *The Duchess*, presenting us with an obstacle to true love, in the form of familial disapproval, and inviting sympathy for the lovers who defy that authority. Yet the play is too dark and its authority figures too sinister to sustain much hope of a comic denouement, and Webster's language steadily reminds us that in this play love and death are inextricable.

Act 2: discovery

Nine months elapse between Acts 1 and 2, and the bulk of the second act is taken up with Bosola's attempt to determine whether or not the Duchess is pregnant. On this level, the play stresses her femaleness: we see her pregnant onstage, devouring apricots, watch her go into labour and then hear, at the close of Act 2, Scene 2, that she has given birth to a son. The play, then, highlights not only her role as duchess, but also her roles as wife and mother, emphasising the fertility of the marriage.

The danger of the couple's position is conveyed through the desperate and ultimately futile attempts to keep the birth of the child a secret. By the end of the act, Ferdinand and the Cardinal have received Bosola's letter informing them of the birth of the Duchess's son.

Ferdinand

Both brothers are clearly furious at the news, making explicit the kind of rank-based disquiet I discussed earlier. Both give vent to misogynist commonplaces, such as the following:

> Foolish men,
> That e'er will trust their honour in a bark
> Made of so slight weak bullrush as is woman,
> Apt every minute to sink it!
>
> (2.5.33–6)

Yet, Ferdinand's anger seems different in kind from the Cardinal's. Indeed, the Cardinal is as shocked by his brother's ravings as any member of the audience, and his alarmed responses confirm that Ferdinand's attitude to the Duchess is obsessive and pathological: 'Speak lower' (2.5.4); 'Why do you make yourself / So wild a tempest?' (2.5.16–17); 'You fly beyond your reason' (2.5.46); 'Are you stark mad?' (2.5.66).

Activity 6

How did you respond to Ferdinand's conduct in this scene? Did it surprise you, or do you think that Webster's characterisation of the Duke of Calabria in Act 1 lays the foundations for his conduct here? Go back through Act 1 and see if you can find any suggestions of the kind of mental instability represented in this scene.

Discussion

In Act 1, before the brothers gang up on their sister in an effort to bully her into submission, Ferdinand tells Bosola that he 'would not have her marry again' (1.1.262). This blanket hostility to a second marriage goes beyond anything voiced by the Cardinal, who is much more concerned about the prospect of an inappropriate union. In reply, Bosola says only 'No, sir?' (1.1.262), yet this unchallenging response is enough to spark the highly defensive 'Do not you ask the reason, but be satisfied / I say I would not' (1.1.263–4). Webster seems to be deliberately arousing our curiosity about Ferdinand's motives here, giving us a glance of the turbulent, unstable personality Antonio mentioned earlier in the scene. Later, when the brothers confront

the Duchess, it is Ferdinand whose language is compulsively sexual, culminating in the dirty joke about the lamprey we considered earlier. He goes on to brandish their father's dagger at her – a gesture many critics have interpreted in phallic terms.

It is these suggestions of an intensely sexualised attitude towards his sister that burst into the open in Act 2, Scene 5. Ferdinand is gripped by fevered, voyeuristic visions of his sister having sex with working-class men characterised by their physical vigour and attractiveness:

> Happily with some strong-thighed bargeman;
> Or one o'th'woodyard that can quoit the sledge
> Or toss the bar; or else some lovely squire
> That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.
>
> (2.5.42–5)

The lines register a fear of encroachment by men whose lower rank is compensated for by their superior masculinity. But what the verse chiefly conveys is Ferdinand's loss of control: he cannot stop himself from visualising the Duchess 'in the shameful act of sin' (2.5.41). He asks his brother 'Talk to me somewhat quickly' (2.5.39), in a futile attempt to shut down an imagination that immediately goes on to enumerate a selection of possible low-class sexual partners. When he shouts ''Tis not your whore's milk that shall quench my wild-fire, / But your whore's blood!' (2.5.47–8), his words are so deranged as to be unintelligible, though his obsession with his sister's body remains clear, as does his powerful urge to do violence to her.

It is probably fair to say that nowadays most critics of the play agree that what underlies Ferdinand's relationship with his sister is unconscious incestuous desire. Indeed, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, when he adapted *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1946, appended a prologue in which Ferdinand confesses his incestuous passion for his sister. What seems to drive Ferdinand's collapse into hysteria in Act 2, Scene 5 is a ferocious sexual jealousy that seems bent not just on the destruction but the obliteration of the loved object. So he imagines 'hewing' the Duchess 'to pieces' (2.5.31) and, in the following passage, rehearses with demented relish different ways of annihilating her and her family:

> I would have their bodies
> Burnt in a coal pit with the ventage stopped,
> That their cursed smoke might not ascend to heaven;
> Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur,
> Wrap them in't and then light them like a match;
> Or else to boil their bastard to a cullis
> And give't his lecherous father to renew
> The sin of his back.
>
> (2.5.66–73)

There is a longing here for a revenge so total that the offending physical selves will cease to exist. There is also a desire to punish the father for his lechery by making him eat his child – a form of retribution Webster would have known from Shakespeare's early revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, in which the protagonist avenges himself on his enemy Tamora by killing her two sons and baking them in a pie which he feeds to her at a dinner party.

By this point in the play there can be no doubt in our minds that Ferdinand is the play's principal villain, albeit a fascinating one. Yet even here, Webster injects a moral dimension, suggesting that the Duke of Calabria's furious desire for vengeance stems in part from guilt:

> I could kill her now
> In you, or in myself, for I do think
> It is some sin in us heaven doth revenge
> By her.
>
> (2.5.63–6)

These cryptic lines imply that Ferdinand's savagery derives in part from a self-loathing which he projects onto his sister. As with Bosola and Antonio, Webster seems keen to endow Ferdinand with a degree of psychological complexity.

Conclusion

Webster is interested in exploring the connection between love and violent sexual jealousy by locating the homicidal jealousy in a brother's yearning for his sister he compounds our awareness of the dark side of sexual desire, the potential for certain species of love to explode into violence. In Ferdinand, Webster presents us with another form of forbidden love and allows us to explore the relationship between love and death from the perspective of the villain.

Brecht's particular interest in Ferdinand's illicit sexual desires points to one of the reasons for our continued fascination with this play. The establishment of Freudian psychoanalysis in the course of the twentieth century brought with it a model of the human psyche which sees unruly repressed desires and impulses as exerting a powerful influence on human behaviour. Webster's characterisation of the Duke of Calabria as a man in the grip of unconscious and taboo erotic longings meshes with a modern conception of the instability and irreducible complexity of the human personality. Having said that, there is every indication that Webster's contemporaries found Ferdinand equally compelling; the role was originally played by Richard Burbage, the great tragic actor of the King's Men who had created the roles of Shakespeare's tragic heroes Hamlet, King Lear and Othello. That Burbage played Ferdinand as well suggests that the character was seen as the principal male role in the first productions of the play.

We have looked in this course at how Webster situates his forbidden cross-class marriage within a very particular dramatic context, thereby stimulating a sympathetic response towards the lovers who flout the dictates of the arbitrary aristocratic power embodied by the Cardinal and Ferdinand.

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