

Lecture 21: *The Duchess of Malfi*, or John Webster's 'Anatomy of Melancholy'

The main characters:

The **Duchess of Malfi** – the PROTAGONIST

Daniel de **Bosola** – her ANTAGONIST {acts as the agent of:

Duke Ferdinand – twin brother of the Duchess &

The Cardinal – the other brother of the Duchess}

Antonio – the Duchess's steward & husband

Cariola – the Duchess's maid and confidante

Delio – Antonio's friend and confidant

Julia – wife of Castruccio and mistress of the Cardinal

Play begins w/ Antonio's picture of an ideal state, France:

In seeking to reduce both state and people

To a fix'd order, their judicious king

Begins at home; quits first his royal palace

Of flattering sycophants, of dissolute

And infamous persons, which he sweetly terms

His master's masterpiece, the work of heaven;

Considering duly, that a prince's court

Is like a common fountain, whence should flow

Pure silver drops in general, but if't chance

*Some curs'd example **poison**'t near the head,*

Death and diseases through the whole land spread.

And what is't makes this blessed government,

But a most provident council, who dare freely

Inform him the corruption of the times?

(1.1.5-18)

Then Bosola enters, a **melancholy** man, who *might* be but is not one of those *provident* (17) counsellors. He's not a *flattering sycophant* (8) but he *is* an *infamous person* (9).

Antonio calls him "The only court-gall" (23), a kind of Socratic gadfly, BUT says that *his railing*

Is not for simple love of piety:

Indeed he rails at those things which he wants. (24-25)

He is not so much a skeptic as a cynic, a **malcontent**, because his ambition is frustrated.

Antonio goes on to observe:

'Tis great pity,

He should be thus neglected: I have heard

*He's very valiant. This foul **melancholy*** [1

Will poison all his goodness; for, I'll tell you,

If too immoderate sleep be truly said

To be an inward rust unto the soul,

It then doth follow want of action

*Breeds all black **malcontents**.* (67-74)

Besides being the Duchess's lover, Antonio is a sort of chorus because he defines the basic morality of Webster's play. He sees the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand for what they are:

Of the Cardinal Antonio says:

*observe his **inward** character: he is a **melancholy** churchman; the spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads; where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for him than ever was imposed on Hercules, for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters.* (1.2.66-71)

As for Ferdinand:

*The duke there? a most perverse and turbulent nature:
What appears in him mirth is merely **outside**;
If he laugh heartily, it is to laugh
All honesty out of fashion.* (76-79)

Despite her anomalous status as a secretly remarried widow, the Duchess's goodness provides a kind of moral center for the play; she is like a rock, pure will and integrity. Her lover and her brothers are almost stock characters— a Virtue and two Vices. They are measured against the paradoxical honesty of the Duchess.

Bosola is the only really dynamic character. Her virtue is the agency that transforms him: from a self-interested villain into a self-sacrificing hero as his allegiance shifts from Ferdinand to the Duchess.

Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal don't want their widowed sister to re-marry. Why?

So they set Bosola to spy on her:

*CARDINAL: Be sure you entertain that Bosola
For your intelligence: I would not be seen in't; . . .*

*FERDINAND: Antonio, the great master of her household,
Had been far fitter.*

*CARDINAL: You are deceiv'd in him:
His nature is too honest for such business. (130-36)*

So Bosola becomes Ferdinand's "creature," one of his *familiars*—"a very quaint invisible devil in flesh; / An intelligencer" (164-65).

After being specifically told by her brothers not to remarry, the Duchess woos and wins Antonio, resolving to keep the matter secret.

Her maid, Cariola, promises:

*I'll conceal this secret from the world,
As warily as those that trade in **poison**
Keep **poison** from their children. (1.3.79-81)*

The relationship between Antonio and the Duchess is tainted, as if it is somehow doomed to become a kind of moral poison. Not (I would say) because it is wrong or sick, but because nothing healthy can grow in the poisonous atmosphere of the play.

Meanwhile . . . (Act 2): As he grows hardened in the service of Duke Ferdinand, and perhaps frustrated by his failure as an intelligencer, Bosola's melancholy becomes more bitter and his cynicism seems to deepen as he learns to hate himself. To an Old Woman and Castruccio, the impotent husband of Julia, he says:

I do wonder you do not loathe yourselves.

Observe my meditation now:

What thing is in this outward form of man

To be belov'd? We account it ominous,

If nature do produce a colt, or lamb,

A fawn, or goat, in any limb resembling

A man, and fly from't as a prodigy.

Man stands amaz'd to see his deformity

In any other creature but himself. (2.1, 18)

Bosola plots to betray the duchess and finally figures out who her lover is. Antonio understands Bosola's character:

You would look up to heaven, but I think

The devil, that rules i'th'air stands in your light. (86-87)

But Bosola has a certain power over Antonio precisely because Antonio is forced to play Bosola's game:

The great are like the base, nay, they are the same,

When they seek shameful ways to avoid shame.

(2.3.51-52)

Meanwhile, the subplots, revolving around Julia, the Cardinal, Delio (whose suit she rejects), and Bosola (whom she actively pursues), underscore and expand the play's exploration of misogyny.

What is misogyny?

The Cardinal accuses Julia of infidelity:

*Sooth, generally for women;
A man might strive to make glass malleable,
Ere he should make them fixed.* (2.4. 12-14)

Julia seems to refute this proposition, specifically, by refusing to become Delio's mistress, but she later seems to validate it by her pursuit of Bosola. The Duchess, however, refutes the misogynist trope absolutely by her constancy, even when threatened by death.

Duke Ferdinand is obsessed with his sister's shameful act of sin and plots her destruction. His passion speaks of a possessiveness toward the Duchess that extends well beyond the property that his brother covets. He hates his sister (perhaps the root of his misogyny) and yet desires her and hates his desire.

Having been exposed, Antonio and the Duchess flee to Ancona, from which they and their children are banished at the behest of the Cardinal, and her property is seized.

By the end of Act III, the Duchess is under house arrest; Antonio and their eldest son have fled to Milan. She seems resigned to her fate, as Ferdinand observes:

*Her melancholy seems to be fortified
With a strange disdain.* (4.1.11-12)

As the Duchess grows resigned, Duke Ferdinand grows more wild, trying to drive his sister mad:

BOSOLA: Why do you do this?

FERDINAND: To bring her to despair.

BOSOLA: 'Faith, end here,

And go no farther in your cruelty;

Send her a penitential garment to put on

Next to her delicate skin, and furnish her

With beads, and prayer-books. (4.1.114-119)

The reference to the Duchess's *delicate skin* is surely ill-judged if it is meant to soften Ferdinand's hatred.

Clearly, it intensifies his rage:

*FERDINAND: Damn her! that body of hers,
While that my blood ran pure in't, was more worth
Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul.
I will send her masks of common courtesans,
Have her meat serv'd up by bawds and ruffians,
And, 'cause she'll needs be mad, I am resolv'd
To remove forth the common hospital
All the mad-folk, and place them near her lodging;
There let them practice together, sing and dance,
And set their gambols to the full o'th' moon:
If she can sleep the better for it, let her.
Your work is almost ended.* (119-30)

Ferdinand's cruelty begins to affect Bosola too. He resolves that he'll *Never* see her again *in his own shape*:
*That's forfeited by my intelligence,
And this last cruel lie: when you send me next,
The business shall be comfort.* (131-34)

Bosola's compassion for the Duchess is augmented by a sense of *injured merit* when Ferdinand refuses to acknowledge his service.

Does anybody know where that phrase *injured merit* comes from?

What does it mean?

Bosola has the duchess killed, as much an act of mercy as cruelty perhaps. And then, instead of being consumed by his melancholy, Bosola finds that his equivocal moral sense is clarified by pity and his own adversity.

*The office of justice is perverted quite,
When one thief hangs another. Who shall dare
To reveal this?* (4.2.283-85)

Bosola begins to develop a conscience:

*I stand like one
That long hath ta'en a sweet and golden dream:
I am angry with myself, now that I wake. . . .
What would I do, were this to do again?
I would not change my peace of conscience
For all the wealth of Europe.* (300-18)

And he resolves to accomplish some sort of atonement:

*I'll post to Milan,
Where somewhat I will speedily enact
Worth my dejection.* (350-52)

In Act V, Scene i, Antonio resolves to confront the Cardinal.

In Scene ii, Duke Ferdinand has fallen victim to lycanthropy.

What is lycanthropy? Why does it seem an apt destiny for Duke Ferdinand?

Bosola resolves to help Antonio and perhaps join him in avenging the Duchess:

*Well, good Antonio,
I'll seek thee out; and all my cares shall be
To put thee into safety from the reach
Of these most cruel biters, that have got
Some of thy blood already. It may be,
I'll join with thee, in a most just revenge:
The weakest arm is strong enough, that strikes
With the sword of justice. Still methinks the duchess
Haunts me: there, there!— 'tis nothing but my melancholy.
O Penitence, let me truly taste thy cup,
That throws men down, only to raise them up!*

(5.2.321-31)

In the last Act of the play, Bosola seems to undergo a kind of religious conversion, problematic but plausible. He fails in his attempt to assist Antonio, whom he kills by mistake and whose death he hastens:

Antonio?

*The man I would have sav'd 'bove mine own life!
We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and banded
Which way please them. O good Antonio,
I'll whisper one thing in thy dying ear,
Shall make thy heart break quickly. Thy fair duchess
And two sweet children— . . . are murder'd. (5.4.52-59)*

Bosola kills Ferdinand and the Cardinal and is himself killed; his final reflections seem to sum up both the moral development of the play and his own struggle to discover his *good nature*.

*Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi, murder'd
By the Arragonian brethren; for Antonio,
Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
Poison'd by this man; and lastly for myself,
That was an actor in the main of all
Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th' end
Neglected. . . . (5.5.77-83)*

What does *Neglected* mean here? Who or what has been neglected?

The play is not so much resolved as dissolved

*In a mist: I know not how:
Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play. O, I am gone!
We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,
That ruin'd, yield no echo. Fare you well.
It may be pain, but no harm to me to die
In so good a quarrel. O, this gloomy world!
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!
Let worthy minds ne'er stagger in distrust
To suffer death or shame for what is just:
Mine is another voyage. (5.5. 90-101)*

In light of all that has gone before, the final, hopeful lines spoken in the play by Delio resonate ironically with Bosola's sense that he has gone or is going on "another voyage":

*Integrity of life is fame's best friend,
Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.*

NOTES

1] The language of the play is often difficult; the notes in our edition are usually sufficient, but they could be supplemented by consulting a well annotated edition of the play on line at:

http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/Malfi/malfi_home.htm.

Here, for example, is a note on the word *melancholy* (I.1.69):

THEORY OF HUMOURS:

Following classical and medieval ideas, Renaissance scholars explained human behavior (what we would today call psychology) by the theory of humours, four bodily fluids (blood, phlegm, choler, and black bile) whose relative proportions in the body were thought to determine a person's disposition and general health. An excess of one of the humours would cause an imbalance in the system and aberrant behavior. Possibly Webster intended to reflect this theory in the composition of his main characters:

Duchess = sanguine (full-blooded, robust, full of life)

Cardinal = phlegmatic (impassive, unemotional, stoic)

Bosola = melancholic (depressed, moody, cynical)

Duke [Ferdinand] = choleric (angry, hot-tempered)

The image of Death is also from this page, a 1998 production at David Lipscomb University in Nashville, TN, directed by Larry Brown. Duff Harris is Death.

http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/Malfi/malfi_home.htm

The other 2 images are from a 2002 production by the Shakespeare Theater in Washington, D.C. Photos by Carol Rosegg.

1) Donald Carrier: Ferdinand; Kelly McGillis: Duchess; Edward Gero: Cardinal.

2) Kelly McGillis: Duchess; Robert Tyree: Antonio; Caroline Clay: Cariola. www.shakespearedc.org/gallery/g01028.html