

# Bosola and antonio: preferment and admission of inferiority



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The Renaissance Era was a period when theatre, among other forms of art, bloomed in its adolescence, as it outgrew old, traditional characteristics of the Middle Ages, and gradually evolved into what would later become known as modern history. Unlike tragedies of previous eras – which depended highly on one fatal flaw of the protagonists to lead them to perpetual torment – tragedies of the Renaissance age saw a great shift in the complexities of the characters in a play, as the period was highly influenced by humanism. Characters were no longer ‘flat’ but ‘dynamic’, thus, resembling that of real-life individuals more accurately than before. With such shifts in characterization, themes and conflicts in theatre consequently underwent similar developments from being plain and straightforward, to thought-provoking and relatable. One such thought-provoking and relatable theme found in *The Duchess of Malfi* is the concept of inferiority and its necessity for advancing in society; a concept which can be identified and explored through the characters Bosola and Antonio.

Cunning, malcontent, and vengeful Bosola is the catalyst to the tragedies which befall the Duchess and her family. From the very first act, Bosola is introduced as an ex-criminal who vocalizes his frustration with how underappreciated he is for his services. He finds it difficult to accept his lowly position given the fact that he has done so much for his employers. He compares himself to a “soldier that hazards his limbs in a battle”, and receives “nothing” in return, while “there are rewards for hawks and dogs when they have done us service.” Even Antonio acknowledges this misfortune of Bosola’s, stating, “’Tis great pity he should be thus neglected: I have heard he’s very valiant. This foul melancholy will poison all his

goodness...” which also hints to readers and the audience of the future corruption that Bosola will embody. However, Bosola perseveres, and is determined to “ thrive some way”, even if it means having to degrade himself to a creature unworthy of honour and respect.

When Ferdinand offers him gold and a better position in return for spying on the Duchess, Bosola fervently refuses and proclaims that he would much rather kill than spy on a woman. Moreover, the task would make him an “ impudent traitor”; “ a very quaint invisible devil in flesh.” Yet, strangely, Bosola accepts the task – with some unwillingness, it seems – which highlights the extent this man is willing to demean himself in order to rise in the social ladder. This is the first scene in the play that outlines the question, “ Does a ‘ preferment’ in the world necessitate admission of inferiority?”

This scene is not unusual; nor is this question only applicable to the period of time when this play was composed. The act of degrading yourself in one way or another – whether out of humility or mere greed – in order to rise in power and attain wealth, is and has always been a popular theme in literature and art throughout history. Evidently, Bosola’s motive for accepting the task of a spy is out of greed and ambition. On the other hand, Antonio exhibits a similar notion of unavoidable subordination towards the Duchess but does so with all the admirable qualities of a good, loyal, and humble servant.

Antonio does not conceal his admiration, respect and fidelity for the Duchess. She is introduced in the play through his exaltations of her, as though she were a being devoid of flaw, almost goddess-like. This highly subjective opinion insinuates possible feelings of love towards the Duchess,

but being her social inferior, we, the readers and the audience, are fully aware that any such feelings for his employer is to be cast aside, for he could never openly court her. So, when the Duchess reveals her love for him and takes the initiative to woo and propose to Antonio, it does not seem completely absurd as she is in a position to do so. However, her gender must have obviously been a factor that made her proposal highly unorthodox at the time, if not absurd. Moreover, the fact that the audience and readers know that the Duchess slyly plans to propose to him whereas Antonio has absolutely no idea of her underlying intentions emphasizes his inferior position. This shift in gender roles – caused by the restrictions which social class conventions imposes upon society – is not overlooked by Antonio. He points out his awareness of this peculiar gender-role-swap, saying to his wife, “ These words should be mine,” as the Duchess not only takes on the role of a confident leader during the proposal, but even throughout much of the play; such as repeatedly reassuring Antonio of their safety, because Antonio is constantly fearful of eminent danger.

With regards to the notion of inferiority, it is manifest in Antonio’s actions that he has no choice but to humble himself before the Duchess. His love for her is unquestionable, and so his feelings of “ unworthiness” is most likely an outcome of his veneration for the woman he loves. However, he is still a male character of the 17th century and putting aside his pride as a man in order to accept being proposed to must have taken some impressive amount of modesty. On top of that, there is the possibility that Antonio is motivated to cast aside his male pride because he is aware of the power he would gain if he were to accept this proposal. “ Ambition, madam, is a great man’s

madness,” he says. This is evidence of his consciousness and caution of the situation. Antonio is a righteous character who fears that his reasons for marrying the Duchess may be mixed with both love and ambition. Whether he accepts the proposal out of pure love alone, or both love and ambition, Antonio does advance in the social hierarchy through the necessary act of admitting his inferiority – much like Bosola. What differs between the two major characters is that Antonio’s advancement is out of being simply good and honest. He advances through the holy and romantic system of matrimony, whereas Bosola advances through deceit and immoral means.

To sum up, Webster has made this idea of indispensable subordination – and the inescapable act of embracing it – a prominent theme in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Through Bosola and Antonio, two extremely different characters, Webster has evoked the question of whether a rise in social status or power necessitates the admission of inferiority. The answer is an unsettling truth which Webster demonstrated through this play. It is proven that there is no escaping it; our inferiority cannot be ignored when an advancement in life is at stake. It is an answer that is manifest in the question itself, for why would there be a need to ‘rise’ at all if we are not inferior in some way?