

Examine the character of bosola in webster's the duchess of malfi essay sample

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The malcontent is a certain character type that emerges in Jacobean revenge tragedy. Examples include figures like Ford's Vasquez and Middleton and Rowley's De Flores. In 'The Duchess of Malfi', this is the character of Bosola. A malcontent can be identified by a number of traits. He is a discontented person; a rebel; disaffected, satirical and melancholic; bereaved or dispossessed and detached from an often corrupt society by his grievances; he has knowledge and intelligence without status. As one of the key characters in 'The Duchess of Malfi', Bosola can easily be studied to see if these traits of the malcontent are present in his own character.

The initial presentation of Bosola in the first scene of the play certainly does agree with this description of the malcontent. Antonio defines him as a "black malcontent" whose "foul melancholy will poison all his goodness". We see him making sarcastic remarks, being critical of court and Church, feeling bitter after his imprisonment in the galleys and he seems perceptive showing his intelligence despite lack of position in the society of Malfi. The very first description of Bosola by Antonio asserts the popular opinion of Bosola by the characters in the play, and this agrees with the statement that Bosola is a malcontent:

" Here comes Bosola,

The only court-gall; 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.”

Here we see Bosola as dispossessed and detached from others due to his yearning for what he cannot have.

There are many instances in the play where we see Bosola as having knowledge and intelligence without status, although sometimes pedantic in his studies to “ gain the name of a speculative man”, perhaps more for recognition than sheer pursuit of knowledge. Delio suggests he is too studious, “ a fantastical scholar”. Bosola is the first to notice that the Duchess is pregnant before any suspicions are confirmed for the other characters and this is emphasised by his clever trick with the apricots. He is always aware of more than just what he is told to do, and that his lot is always to be bought:

“ Let good men, for good deeds, covet good fame,

Since place and riches oft are bribes of shame.”

His intelligence is essential to him; he knows that to be successful he must be clever. He has a drive to serve whilst longing for more:

“...to avoid ingratitude

For the good deed you have done me, I must do

All the ill man can invent.”

His lower status is also confirmed in the layout of his speeches; he speaks in prose or blank verse whilst characters of higher status speak in iambic pentameter, for example, his long speech of lines 35 – 72 in Act II Scene I. These characteristics do confirm his role as malcontent.

Bosola is often critical of power and authority in the Church and court, even of those who employ him, the Cardinal and Ferdinand:

“ He and his brother are like plum trees that grow crooked

Over standing pools: they are rich, and o’erladen with fruit,

But none but crows, pies and caterpillars feed on them.”

Again we see Bosola speaking in prose as a contrast to the strict form of the nobles. It is clear from very early in the play of Bosola’s opinion of the Cardinal and this serves as insight to the reader to possible future events in the play. He also describes the Cardinal thus:

“ Some fellows, they say, are possessed with

The devil but this great fellow were able to possess the greatest devil and make him worse.”

If Bosola’s public persona as scourge of courtly behaviour suggests his role as malcontent, so too do his private meditations of despair. He is constantly locked into a cycle of serving the powerful and corrupt but with knowledge of

why he is told to conduct his services and what consequences these base activities have. However, at the same time he seems to have to have little trouble in working for both the Duchess and her brothers simultaneously despite conflicts of interest.